

# Boria: A Conventional Theatre in Malaysia

Farideh Alizadeh and Mohd Effindi Samsuddin

**Abstract**—This study is considering Boria as a conventional performance in Malaysia. Boria is a folk performance unique to Penang. This theatre style reached Penang in the mid-19th century and is believed to be derived from the Shia Islamic Passion play performed during the Muslim month of Muharram to commemorate the martyrs of Kerbela. These days in Malaysia (especially Penang) Boria mentions to a choral street performance performed annually by a number of groups composed mostly of Sunni Malaysian. Boria are performed for entertainment and often include an annual singing competition. The size, membership, themes and movements of each Boria troupe may vary from year to year. Similarly, the themes and contents of the Boria performed by the different troupes also changes each year and can have a comical, political or satirical notion. It is common to most groups during the first ten days of Muharram Boria generally is done.

**Keywords**—Boria, conventional performance, ritual, Passion play, theatre.

## I. THE HISTORY OF BORIA

**B**ORIA originated in Persia. Various explanations have been advanced for referring to a receptacle or container holding incense, passed around during meetings of a religious nature. Some explanations describe Boria as carpet or mat where mourners would sit wailing and crying at times in a state of frenzy during the first ten nights of the month of Muharram, commemorating in question and response sessions the courage, heroics, specially the fourth caliph, Ali, his sons Hassan and Hussain, and their families. Finally, the term Boria means, in several Indian languages, sackcloth. There is a strong possibility that Boria with this concept of the word, because during the mourning period sackcloth was commonly worn (Fig. 1) [1].

Like contemporary Boria, nineteenth century Boria is believed to have consisted of an annual event held during the first ten days of Muharram in which various troupes dressed up as different characters and often accompanied by music. Most scholars report, however, that nineteenth century Boria were performed chiefly by Indian migrants comprising an amalgamation of sepoys<sup>1</sup> (especially the Indian Native Infantry), laborers, convicts or traders rather than native

Malays and that the performances were not competitive but fairly religious corresponding to the Shia Muharram festival. Thus these scholars stated that it was these Indian who first introduced the Shia Muharram festival with its accompanying religious zeal and pathos into nineteenth century Malaysia and that the local Sunni Malays by either observance or intermarriage with Indian migrants gradually adopted the religious Muharram festival as their own, transforming it into a non-religious practice. Similarly, several researchers argue that the origin of the word Boria is to be either from Persian or Indian languages, both of which have been introduced into the Malay language directly from India.

Indian Shia put on Boria to Penang. Boria is developed in Penang in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Reference to the Dictionary of traditional South-East Asian Theatre reveals that two possible dates have been advanced, 1845 and 1874. It came to Penang through India and was almost certainly introduced into the island by Indians of Shia origin. Sunni do not observe in any substantial way the martyrdom Ali's family [2]. Boria has been changed during the time from passion play<sup>2</sup> to musical and comedy (Fig. 2) a study by H.T. Haughton shown that in Penang the name Boria is from the 21st regiment, and has become celebrated. Nowadays the Malays have given their own different names to it, but they call all of the Boria for the purpose of asking charity for them. In Madras<sup>3</sup> wherever the Regiment is stationed the Boria play is performed [3].

In this case, Haughton in 1845 (as cited in Bujang, 1989) tried to organize the origin Boria in Penang by a group of Muslim soldiers of the Madras Infantry during the month of Muharram in as early as 1845. (Fig. 3) It is important to note that fully replicate:

"To sing a tropical song. No derivation of the word is given. The use of the word is chiefly to the pantomimes of mimic play which are acted by Malays in Penang Town during the month of Muharram. It is passion origin, according to Forbes, and means a 'mat' in Hindustani. The following account of the word as I have received from an Indian in Penang will throw some light on the subject, as I believe, fanciful derivation of the word have been suggested.

The plain meaning of the word Boriah in the Hindustani and Deccan language is a 'place of prayer' (praying carpet), and in Malay they call it "Tikar" (a mat). Formerly in the year 1845, the 21st. Regiment used to be given 10 day's leave in the month of Muharram for the purpose of mourning of the

Farideh Alizadeh, is with the Cultural Center, University of Malaya (UM), 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Mobile: 0060162887511; e-mail: faride2001@gmail.com).

Mohd Effindi Samsuddin, is with the Cultural Center, University Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, 0060162066477 (e-mail: effindi@um.edu.my).

<sup>1</sup>Origin of Sepoy came from Hindi word "Sepahi" which means a soldier or a cop. No, a Sepoy is an Indian soldier serving under British command. They are also called 'Jawans'. Discontent with British administration in India led to numerous mutinies in 1857 and 1858; the revolt was put down after several battles and sieges (notably the siege at Lucknow). Classified under: Nouns denoting acts or actions. Synonyms: Indian Mutiny; Sepoy Mutiny. Read more: <http://www.audioenglish.net/dictionary/sepoys>

<sup>2</sup>Passion play (Taziyeh): Passion play is a dramatic form known as the Passion play and Taziyeh (Tazia) in India and also in Iran.

<sup>3</sup>Madras: Chennai, also known as Madras /məˈdræs/, is the capital city of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Located on the Coromandel Coast off the Bay of Bengal, it is a major commercial, cultural, and educational center in South India.

grandsons of the prophet. These military men used to form parties and sing songs of mourning. For instance, representing four person, Nanak Shah, Jogi Majnun, Balva Ghaghri, and Boria, they used to dress up in clothes mats and mourn for Husain, and used to recite the following piece of poetry:

Boria everywhere in the world;  
Boria the best of its kind;  
Boria the beautiful (was) seen;  
Sacred and pure Boria.  
In the countries of madras  
The Boria is made of glass;  
Fences are made with bamboo;  
Boria is green in color" [4].

The opinion of Houghton tends to say about the importance of Boria. In addition, he tries to trace the roots Boria; he tells us that part of the pantomime of Boria imitation played a part in the festival of Muharram.

Taziyeh or Shahid is known as an Islamic Drama in Iran. It is a drama enacting the suffering and death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet of Islam [8]. Islamic Drama examines the evolution of passion play or Taziyeh, which involved elements drawn from Zoroastrianism<sup>4</sup>, Mithraism<sup>5</sup>, mythology, folklore and traditional forms of Iranian entertainment. In its final form, most of its elements-plot, character, thought, spectacle and song-derive from the Shia branch of Islam. In the 20th century it was attacked by pro-Western and nationalistic movements who saw performances as encouraging social stagnation. Despite the setbacks, today it is still possible to see performances of the Taziyeh throughout Iran.

In the Encyclopedia of Islam the play is described: Taziyeh that is called Ta'ziya in Arab has been known "passion play" of the Shi'as:

"Among the Shi'is the word means in the first place the lamentation for the martyred imams. In particular, however, it is mourning for Husain. The tabut, a copy of the tomb at kept in the house, often very richly executed. Ta'ziya however Kerbela, in popular language is called ta'ziya. It is a model means particularly the mystery play itself.

Lastly taziyeh refers to the actual performance of the passion play itself. The stage is erected in public places, in caravanserais, even in mosques and immambara (enclosures) specially erected for the festival. The stage usually requires a large tabut, receptacles in front to hold lights, also Husain's

bow, lance, spear and banner. Besides the players, participants include the rawaz-khawan, the poet indicating lamentation chants a khutba with many hadiths....." [5].

The Taziyeh the festival of Muharram in Kerbela to commemorate the murder of the grandson of Prophet Mohammad is examined, during the period in Islam when Muslims are divided into two factions, Shiite and Sunni groups. Taziyeh is also typical of Muharram festival in India. The Encyclopedia above is referred that this form of India is influenced of indigenous. As mentioned in Haughton's opinion, the Boria in Penang then was an activity of Muslim Indian soldiers who would also presumably be Shiites.



Fig. 1 Boria performances of the early 20th century included a daytime procession in which participants masks and wore sack-cloth robes [6]



Fig. 2 Boria ceremony musical and comedy, in Kuala Lumpur (1982) [7]

<sup>4</sup>Zoroastrianism: "Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith." Mary Boyce. Read more: <http://paradigm-shift-21st-century.nl/zoroastrianism>. Zarathustra (in Greek, Zoroaster) was a Persian prophet who at the age of 30 believed he had seen visions of God, whom he called Ahura Mazda, the creator of all that is good and who alone is worthy of worship. Read more: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Zoroastrianism>

<sup>5</sup>Zoroastrianism: "Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith." Mary Boyce. Read more: <http://paradigm-shift-21st-century.nl/zoroastrianism>. Zarathustra (in Greek, Zoroaster) was a Persian prophet who at the age of 30 believed he had seen visions of God, whom he called Ahura Mazda, the creator of all that is good and who alone is worthy of worship. Read more: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Zoroastrianism>



Fig. 3 Set Boria in the early 1920s. by Hj.YusoffAzmiMerican [8]



Fig. 4 Procession Boria into Hutton Street -1938 [9]

## II. CONCLUSION

Boria is known as a traditional theatre that is very popular in Penang. It probably seems this traditional style to take place in Muslim area. Boria is a form that originated in Muharram festivities whenever Indian Muslims stayed. It is likely; Boria is performed under different sketches such as song and dance performing by Indian soldiers as Houghton said. In this regard, we should know that the Muharram festivities were banned in Singapore in 1842. Partly, these festivities were banned in Penang and the license of ritual became violent.

It appears that some of the Indian ritual has moved from Indian to Malay. So, they have brought elements of content with themselves to Malay culture. Although, Boria has been changed to song and dancing acts (its content belongs to routine life such as food, game etc.), the ritual form has been known through people. Section is not required. Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to special thank Dato' Prof. Rahmah Bujang. She has had us so much input to take new idea. our thank you also goes to Associate Professor Dr. Mohd Nasir Bin Hashim to his support and encouragement, Dr. Zainal Abd. Latiff, Professor Shirin Bozorgmehr, Dr. Mohammad Zaimaran, Dr. Amir Ashraf Aryanpour, and Dr. Naser Takmil Homayoun.

## REFERENCES

- [1] G.-S. Yousof, *Boria in Dictionary of traditional South-East Asian theatre.*, Oxford University Press: The United States, 1994, pp. 31-2.
- [2] G.-S. Yousof, *Boria in Dictionary of traditional South-East Asian theatre*, Oxford University Press: The United States, 1994, p. 32.
- [3] H.T. Haughton, *Boriah*, Journal of the Straits of the Royal Asiatic Society, vol. 1, 1987, p. 313.
- [4] R. Bujang, *the Boria of Penang: From Ritual to Popular Performance*, Pengajian Melayu, 1989, pp. 98-9.
- [5] The Encyclopedia of Islam, Luzac & Co: London, 1934. p. 712.
- [6] G.-S. Yousof, *the Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Performing Arts*, 1990, p. 104.
- [7] *Boria Pulau Pinang*, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian&Pelancongan Malaysia: Penang, 2012, p. 6.
- [8] *BoriaPulau Pinang*, KementerianKebudayaan, Kesenian&Pelancongan Malaysia: Penang, 2012.
- [9] *BoriaPulau Pinang*,KementerianKebudayaan, Kesenian&Pelancongan Malaysia: Penang, 2012, p. 7.

**Farideh Alizadeh** was born in Iran. She graduated in Theory of Art in Master (2005) and Degree in Set Design of Theatre (1988) at University of Art & Architecture in Iran. She kept studying her Ph.D. in the field of Drama at University Malaya.

She has been a University lecturer at University of Art and Architecture (2005-2011), Scene and Costume Designer and Author in Tehran, Iran and in Malaysia. Also, she is Research Assistance in the Department of Drama at the University Malaya in Malaysia since 2012, working with Dr. Mohd Effendi Samsuddin. She has written a book *Dramatic Literature eclectic* that published in Tehran, Iran, in Afraz Publishing (2011). Moreover, she has written some articles which are included: *The proposed theory to: Studying applications of Video Art In Set Design* that will be published in PSRC, Jakarta, Indonesia (2012); *Critical Theory of Eclectic Theatre: A study in theoretical and practical criticism with applications to play in Iran* that will be published in Youth Theatre Journal (YTJ) (2013); *The Reality of Scene in Imagination* printed in the Journal of "University Home Theatre", Tehran, Iran, in February (2009); *Research Criticism on Play Kulebar* to be printed in Quarterly for Art and Culture Research Centre, University Jihad, Tehran, Iran (2006).