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Alan Darmawan

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# ERECTING THE SUBMERGED TREE TRUNK

## *Mak Yong* theatre and practices of traditionalisation in the Riau Islands, Indonesia

Alan Darmawan 

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the efforts of constructing the narrative of continuity that connects the Indonesian province of Riau Islands with the former Malay kingdoms, Riau-Lingga-Johor-Pahang, and supports the claims to be the heir of the originator of Malay civilisation. Focusing on the case of the revived *mak yong* theatre, I look at the roles of speeches, writings, stage performances, historic sites, and museum displays that serve as the very fabric of the narrative construction called traditionalisation. I argue that traditionalisation aims to authenticate *mak yong* as an iconic and official representation of Malay inheritance, with impact on its presentation today, justifying the claim and locating the Riau Islands in a prestigious position in the cultural configurations in Indonesia and the Malay world.

### ABSTRAK

*Makalah ini membahas tentang upaya dalam membangun narasi kesinambungan yang menghubungkan Provinsi Kepulauan Riau dengan kerajaan- kerajaan Melayu pada masa lalu, yakni Riau-Lingga-Johor-Pahang, dan dalam menyokong pengakuannya sebagai pewaris dari peletak dasar peradaban Melayu. Dengan menelaah kasus kebangkitan teater mak yong, saya mengamati bekerjanya ujaran, tulisan, pertunjukan panggung, situs bersejarah, dan pameran museum yang berfungsi sebagai jalinan dalam rancang-bangun narasi keberlanjutan, yang prosesnya disebut tradisionalisasi. Menurut saya, tradisionalisasi bertujuan untuk melandasi pengabsahan bentuk autentik teater mak yong sebagai representasi ikonik dan resmi warisan budaya Melayu, yang berdampak pada cara penyajiannya pada masa kini, dan membenarkan pendakuan tersebut serta menempatkan Kepulauan Riau pada kedudukan yang bergengsi dalam tatanan budaya di Indonesia dan dunia Melayu.*

### KEYWORDS

Heritage; *mak yong*; Malay; performance; Riau Islands; traditionalisation

### KATA KUNCI

Warisan; *mak yong*; Melayu; pertunjukan; Kepulauan Riau; tradisionalisasi

## Introduction

At the cultural festival *Revitalisasi Budaya Melayu* [Revitalising Malay Culture] in 2012, the Mayor of Tanjung Pinang (2003–2013) Suryatati A. Manan said in her opening address:

**CONTACT** Alan Darmawan  ad100@soas.ac.uk

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this town had for hundreds of years been known as one of the centres of the Malay kingdoms, and hence, as the centre of Malay civilisation. We want to revive these roles in this era with its undoubtedly big opportunities, because besides its status as an autonomous municipality, [Tanjung Pinang] is also the capital of Riau Islands Province.

(Abdul Malik 2010: ix)<sup>1</sup>

Suryatati's speech forges a narrative that connects the town to the era of Johor and Riau-Lingga sultanates from the 17th to the 19th centuries.<sup>2</sup> This narrative presupposes a continuity that positions the town as the heir of Malay civilisation. The Riau Islands local authority promotes this narrative as the dominant discourse to justify some cultural elements from the past as continuing a tradition from the era of the former Malay kingdoms. The local government and cultural activists have encouraged the formation of heritage through the promotion of historical sites, objects, and practices, including rituals and performing arts, promulgating a narrative of continuity to connect them with the present.

This act of connecting certain cultural elements with the past and reinstating them in the present is referred to metaphorically in Malay as 'erecting the submerged tree-trunk' (*membangkit batang terendam*), which is likened to resuscitating or reviving something forgotten or abandoned for a period of time. This expression has been widely used by the local authorities in the Riau Islands as a slogan for cultural projects. In the corpus of Malay oral and literary tradition, the usage of the metaphoric term 'trunk' (*batang*) is associated with the vital function represented by the word 'pillars' (*tiang*) that support a wooden building.<sup>3</sup> The term *batang* in the expression 'erecting the submerged tree-trunk' implies the notions of origin, base, ancestor, and founder. 'To erect' the 'trunk' is to reinstate the traditional culture from the ancestors by re-contextualising it in the present social and cultural configuration. Recontextualisation implies that the cultural form is adapted to the contemporary situation and, therefore, that some elements are newly invented for that purpose. Recontextualisation is possible as a certain cultural form may be decontextualised from its original context to be recontextualised in different social configurations (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 68–69, 73). In this article, instead of looking at a certain cultural form as a given 'tradition,' I focus on the attempts of linking the cultural form like *mak yong* theatre with the past by employing the narrative of continuity to traditionalise it.

Traditionalisation refers to what the American linguistic-anthropologist Dell Hymes (1975: 353) launched as a concept that enlarges the scope of anthropological concern from the employment of the notion of 'tradition' in enumerating cultural practice like folklore to a view of it as a process in social life. Hymes noted that traditionalisation

<sup>1</sup>All translations from the original sources written or spoken in the Malay/Indonesian language quoted in this article are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>The former centre that Suryatati referred to is located on the upstream Carang Creek, which is about 13 kilometres from the centre of present-day Tanjung Pinang.

<sup>3</sup>An example of the use of the term *tiang* is in the Malay aphorism *Gurindam Duabelas* (1847) by Raja Ali Haji (PNRI W 233). In the second section (*pasal yang kedua*), the second couplet says: *Barangsiapa meninggalkan sembahyang, seperti rumah tiada bertiang* (anyone who neglects his prayers is like a house without pillars). The term *batang* is widely used in the Austronesian-speaking world as a botanical idiom interrelated with the notions of origin, cause, source, base, and ancestor (Fox 1995: 223; 1996: 6). The proto-Malayo-Polynesian term *puqun* means 'tree, trunk, base, source' (Fox 1996: 6), from which the word *pun* in Iban society derived as a fundamental leadership terminology that represents 'the person who initiates or originates an action' or leader, elder, founder (Sather 1996: 83–84). Atoni Meto people from Indonesia's West Timor use the metaphor 'trunk' (*uf*) to represent the name of the group (*kanaf*) referring to the original ancestor who founded their settlement (Fox 1996: 143).

can be found in every field of life, for example, when parents tell children about their childhood or more experienced people introduce to newcomers an office or discipline. He also suggested that the task of anthropological investigation is to discover the forms of expressions through which people keep a sense of traditionalised identity alive (Hymes 1975: 354). Based on Hymes' concept, Tom Mould distinguished the explicit efforts of traditionalisation from the implicit factors that reinforce a tradition. He defined traditionalisation

as a process that evokes the traditional past not merely as part of a general dialogue with the past, but as part of an attempt to provide authority for one's own narrative performance and interpretation by supporting or contributing to a community's sense of what is 'traditional'.  
(Mould 2005: 257)

Mould's definition shows the explicit effort as the process of linking some aspects of culture to the past through narrative and the implicit factor of giving authority to it. Suryatati's speech above illustrates a construct connecting the Riau Islands to the past, while implicitly giving authority to the cultural aspects regarded 'traditional' to be reinstated in the present. Such a process is part of assigning a narrative with 'situated meaning', which shows the quality of tradition as 'immediate here', not the inherent objective quality of the past, but the 'active construction' connecting the present with a 'meaningful past' (Bauman 2004: 27). The acts of making a story that connects Tanjung Pinang with Riau-Johor are 'here and now', as a construct that connects the present social and cultural entity with the 'meaningful' past. In this case, traditionalisation departs from the story of a 'glorious' past and its 'continuation' to the present, as a dominant discourse that the local authority has promoted.

Traditionalisation in the Riau Islands is a government-sponsored project. It deploys a single, simplified, coherent narrative of continuity of the Malay political regimes to traditionalise reinvented practices,<sup>4</sup> knowledge, and material cultures. This article focuses on a case study of *mak yong*, a theatre practice that exists in southern Thailand, northern states of the Malay peninsula, North Sumatra and the Riau Islands. *Mak yong* combines dance, music, ritual, storytelling, dialogue, and slapstick in its performance. Its repertoire recounts magico-adventure stories of heroes, who are king and prince (Pak Yong). With other characters like queen and princess (Mak Yong), the repertoire exhibits the life of the royal family, served by male and female royal attendants (Awang and Inang Pengasuh) and other officials.<sup>5</sup> The Riau Islands' *mak yong* applies cross-dressing for the roles of king (female performer) and female attendants (male actor); it uses masks for male performers, distinguishing it from that of traditions in Kelantan in Malaysia and southern Thailand. Music is another component which the Riau Islands' tradition plays at a faster tempo than that of Kelantan, despite their similarity in which 'the complex melodic and lyric content takes a dominant role in the musical structure,

<sup>4</sup>The concept 'reinvention' or 'reinvented' in this article refers to the process of recontextualisation and adaptation of 'longer-standing traditions' (DeWall 2013: 530), which are 'not to be confused with the "invention of tradition"' (Hobsbawm 1983: 8). For further discussion about the reinvention of tradition, see DeWall (2013).

<sup>5</sup>Despite borrowings from other performing traditions like *menora* and *wayang kulit* (Yousof 1976: 83–85), Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (1982: 111–112) reconstructed the 12 'authentic stories' in the repertoire of Kelantan *mak yong* that derive from a basic story called Dewa Muda, whereas in the Riau Islands, the most popular stories include Raja Bungsu Sakti and the local adaptation of the *menora* tale called Wak Perambun. See Darmawan (2021, 2023) for more nuanced description of the current state of *mak yong* in the Riau Islands, its repertoire, dramatic aspect, and performance structure with recordings of the recent stage performances.

dictating tempo, the occurrence of drum timbres, rhythmic patterns, accented patterns and other musical elements' (Matusky 2015: 19).

In spite of its spread in the Malay world, the history of *mak yong* lacks historical evidence.<sup>6</sup> In the Riau Islands, *mak yong* flourished from the late 19th century up to the early 1960s, but declined and was in a state of dormancy until the 1990s (cf. Pudentia 2010). It has been revived since the early 2000s to become one of the most iconic art forms. In its revived version, *mak yong* rarely performs the three-string fiddle (*rebab*) in its opening song, due to the lack of *rebab* players. In contrast, playing *rebab* remains central in the Kelantan tradition declared as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which has been taught in the arts academy in Kuala Lumpur and Penang to develop a national version of *mak yong* (Hardwick 2020: 72–74). In Indonesia, *mak yong* has been inscribed in the national heritage list, and the current production in the Riau Islands is intertwined with cultural politics. It involves various agents to connect the islands with the past kingdoms of Riau-Lingga by employing a narrative of continuity in a process called traditionalisation.

Several recent studies provide insights on the roles of the state actors and other agents in the processes of traditionalisation in Europe and Asia. Certain cultural aspects of the indigenous ethnic Sámi in the Nordic countries employ the label 'tradition' to institutionalise them through legislative process (Cocq 2014). Recognition from the state led to the creation of the Sámi national parliament in Norway and Finland (Cocq 2014: 80). Another case is the traditionalisation of the Fire Festival that involves justification and a subjective frame in constructing historical continuity from the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian period to present-day Iran (Estiri 2018). While the Islamic regime in Iran mocks Zoroastrian beliefs, the counternarrative to the regime reimagines the Fire Festival as a profound aspect of 'Iranianness' (Estiri 2018: 111). These cases show that traditionalisation is related to identity formation, which can either obtain support from the state or criticise it.

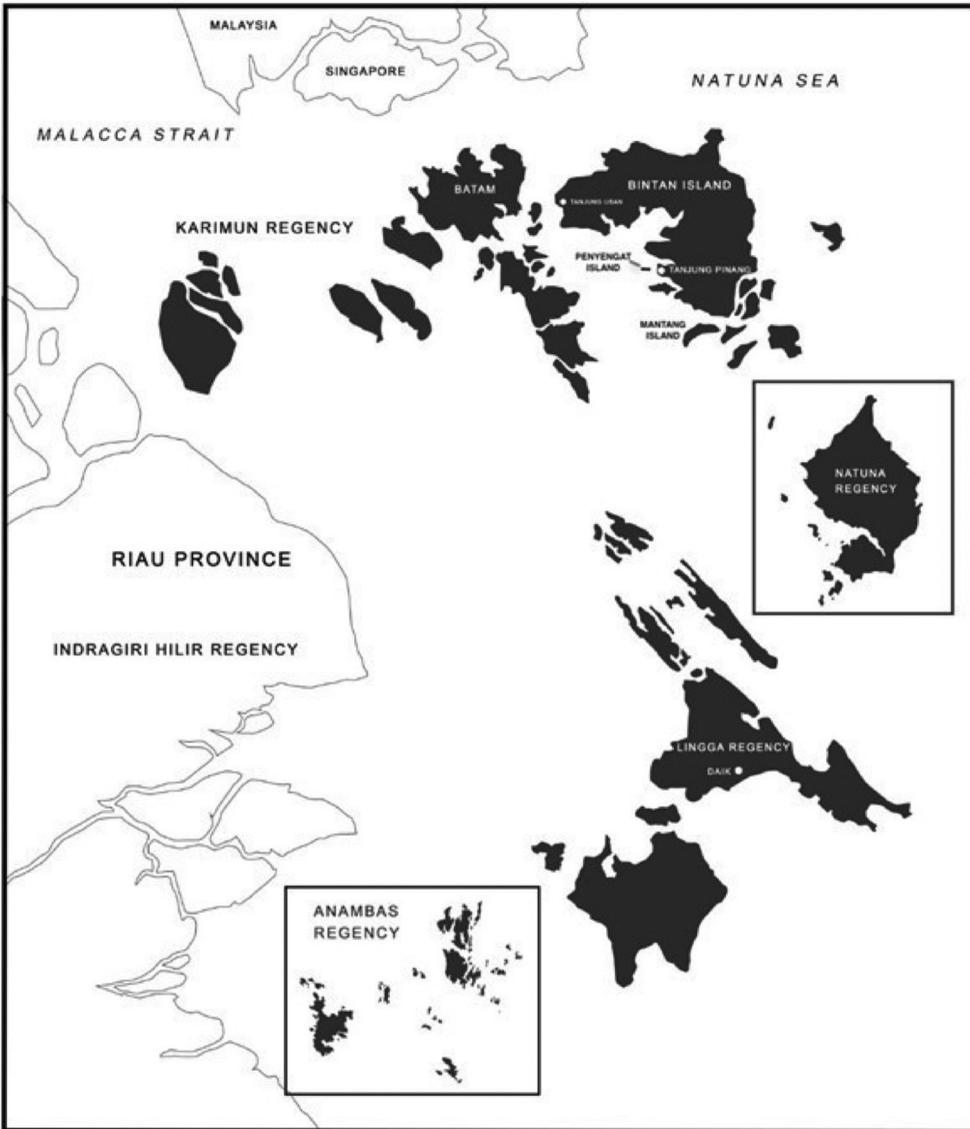
Traditionalisation in the Riau Islands is connected to the formation of Malay identity, rooted in Malay activism during the early period of the 'cultural renaissance' in the 1980s that was centred in Pekanbaru as a form of resistance against the central government and 'Indonesianisation'.<sup>7</sup> This cultural movement reached its peak in the ethnonationalist Free Riau Movement (Riau Merdeka) in 1999–2000, but unsuccessful in its ultimate aim of independence from Indonesia. Then, it was followed by the separation of the Riau Islands from the mainland to become a new province in 2004 (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> Since then, the local authorities in the Riau Islands have promoted a Malay identity distinct from that of Riau in mainland Sumatra, whereby they collaborate with local Malay activists and cultural performers to traditionalise reinvented cultural forms, connecting

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<sup>6</sup>Most studies on *mak yong* examine the theatre practice in Malaysia, looking at its performance structure and repertoire, its national version developed in Kuala Lumpur, adjustment and reinterpretation in the context of the official ban of the Kelantan state. While the *mak yong* production seems to be working in Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur and Riau Islands, the regeneration of performers is poor in southern Thailand (Tan and A.S. Hardy Shafii 2021) and North Sumatra. The latter was last performed in December 2019 in Lubuk Pakam, Deli Serdang.

<sup>7</sup>For more about the cultural movement in Riau, see Al azhar (1997) and Derks (1994, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>The formation of Riau Islands Province (Kepulauan Riau or 'Kepri') was very much driven by the feelings of being members of different communities, which is represented by the terms of *daratan* (mainland Riau) and *kepulauan* (island Riau). For nuanced portrayal of the failure of Riau Merdeka, the split of Riau Province territory, and its immediate impacts on the everyday discourse of Malayness in the Riau Islands, see Colombijn (2003), Kimura (2013: 87–106), Long (2013).



**Figure 1.** Riau Islands Province's administrative territory. @ Alan Darmawan.

them with the former Malay kingdoms in the region. Several agents play roles in these practices of traditionalisation, especially those related to *mak yong*, such as the local and central governments, groups of artists, NGOs, the media, and international agents, including academics and theatre producers.

To what extent does the traditionalisation of *mak yong* contribute to the formation of Malay identity in the region? In what way do the state and other agents assign meaning to *mak yong*? How does traditionalisation impact the art form and its stage performance? I will discuss the roles of the central and local authorities, Malay royal family members, activists, and performers, who drive traditionalisation collaboratively or in competition

and negotiation with each other, particularly in the processes of institutionalisation and authentication of *mak yong*. Based on extensive fieldwork, I focus on speeches, writings, stage performances, and museum displays, which as a whole construct the narrative of continuity. Overall, I argue that this narrative serves as the very fabric of traditionalisation, which in the case of *mak yong* justifies the authentication of the art form as the iconic tradition of the Riau Islands. I begin with the construction of the narrative of continuity based on the reinvented historical accounts, namely the narratives of Bintan, Riau, and Lingga. Later sections discuss how the narrative is deployed to reinstate the *mak yong* tradition, as a marker of local Malay identity. I also explore the impact of authentication and institutionalisation of *mak yong* on the performers and local community's responses to it. In sum, traditionalisation is instrumental in heritage formation and in constructing the narrative of continuity that positions the Riau Islands as the heir of Malay traditions connected to the former Malay kingdoms.

### The local government's efforts at forging a narrative of continuity

Traditionalisation in the Riau Islands employs a narrative of continuity linking the province to the past. Agents such as the local government and activists promote the reinvention of cultural heritage and adjust them to the story of the 'glorious' past. Narratives found in museums, writings, speeches, and stage performances, connect the present-day Riau Islands with Malay political regimes dating back as far as 13th-century Srivijaya. The common thread of the story is the movement of the centre of political power starting from Srivijaya (in southeastern Sumatra) to Bentan, Temasek (now Singapore), Melaka, Johor, and Riau-Lingga, whose former territory has now become part of the Indonesian province of the Riau Islands.

The above story is a simplification of complex historical events, and merely equates political regimes with cultural tradition. The story draws a line that links discontinuous rules. An example is the deposition of the last Riau-Lingga Sultan Abdul Rahman in 1911 by the Dutch, which marked the collapse of Malay rule.<sup>9</sup> The incorporation of the former territory under the jurisdiction of Riau-Lingga directly into the Dutch colony and then into the Indonesian state was a definitive rupture in Malay rule in the area. However, cultural traditions like *mak yong* continued in the Riau Islands into the early to mid 20th century: the ups and downs of the traditions are not necessarily analogous with the continuation or discontinuation of a political regime. The local government's narrative of continuity, in contrast, conjoins several aspects, such as geographic territory (Riau Islands), the political regime ruling in the region (Bentan, Johor-Riau, Riau-Lingga, Riau Islands province), and people with their traditions.

The narrative of Bintan refers to the Malay kingdom of Bentan, which is believed to have been located around Gunung Bintan (Mount Bintan) situated in Bintan Bay. O.W. Wolters (1970: 9, 78) argued that Bentan was one of the islands in the Riau archipelago under the control of the Maharaja of Srivijaya's vassal, to which the Palembang king escaped as he revolted against the Javanese overlord (cf. Andaya 2001: 323, 2008: 59).

<sup>9</sup>For further discussion about the history of Johor-Riau and Riau Lingga, see Raja Haji Ahmad and Raja Ali Haji (1982), Andaya (1975), van der Putten and Al azhar (1995), Trocki (1979); and about the deposition of the last Sultan of Riau-Lingga, see Matheson (1986).

*Sejarah Melayu* records that the Malay king Sang Sapurba and his followers, who came from Bukit Siguntang to the north of present-day Palembang city, visited Bentan. The chief of Bentan – Permaisuri Iskandar Syah – gave a royal welcome to Sang Sapurba and had her daughter Wan Seri Beni marry his son Sang Nila Utama. Sang Nila Utama took over the throne and developed the kingdom, which was later inherited by the dynasties that settled in Temasek and then Melaka.<sup>10</sup> Ever since, Bentan waned and played a minor role in the political and economic configurations in the Malay world for many centuries until its demise as a political institution. Only in the early 2000s, has the Bentan kingdom been revived in terms of cultural roles of the former kingdom. In 2012, a group of people who identified themselves as the descendants of the royal family of the Bentan, gave a mandate to Tanjung Pinang businessman Huzrin Hood to bear the title ‘sultan’ and revive the former kingdom. The newly appointed king gave an Islamic title to the revived kingdom, Kesultanan Bintan Darul Masyhur, the [Sultanate of Bintan the Abode of Repute] and set a goal to uphold Islamic sharia law under his guidance. The sultan has promoted the sultanate based on the reinvented story of Bentan as the ‘mother of Malay kingdoms’ (*ibunda kesultanan Melayu*) that ‘gave birth’ to the later Malay dynasties in Temasek, Melaka, Johor, and Riau-Lingga. Huzrin Hood has used his kingship as a vehicle to create a network with sultans from other Malay kingdoms on the Malay peninsula and those from the Indonesian archipelago. He distributed a book titled *Sesat di Ujung Jalan, Balek ke Pangkal Jalan* [If you lose your way, start afresh]<sup>11</sup> within his network of sultans in the Indonesian archipelago<sup>12</sup> to popularise Bintan Darul Masyhur as the ‘start of the road’ (*pangkal jalan*) of the Malay civilisation (Kesultanan Bintan Darul Masyhur 2015). The book contains stories of Sang Sapurba’s voyage up to the eras of the Melaka, Johor, and Riau-Lingga kingdoms, stressing the current importance of turning back to Bentan as the start of the road (Kesultanan Bintan Darul Masyhur 2015: 19–34, 35–52). The term *pangkal* (base, origin, ancestor) is related to the tree metaphor, as it can be used to mean the lower part of a tree trunk. The idea of *pangkal* is employed to highlight a specific position of Bentan in the genealogy of kingdoms following *Sejarah Melayu* and Huzrin Hood as a successor of the previous kings.

Apart from inventing Bintan Darul Masyhur, the Bintan District local authority institutionalised Malay heritage lists, restoring tombs and sites, remains, and objects to declare them as official cultural representation. The Department of Tourism and Culture (Dinas Pariwisata dan Kebudayaan) implemented the project of documenting, recording, and listing historical objects and cultural practices. The department sponsored local historian Aswandi Syahri to study, document, and produce books on the heritage of Bintan (Aswandi Syahri 2005, 2009, and 2016). In one of the volumes, then District Head Ansar Ahmad (2005–2015) stated:

Bintan is not a new name in the historical trajectories of the region that is now called the Riau Islands Province. The name Bintan has been known since the era of the kingdom of

<sup>10</sup>This story refers to this edited version: Shellabear (1995); that I selected in consideration for the close link of its storyline to that popular in the Riau Islands.

<sup>11</sup>This slogan implies that, based on Huzrin Hood’s interpretation, those who did not practice Islamic sharia had lost their way. This is the reason why they need to return to *pangkal jalan*, which is sharia and traditional leadership practised in Kesultanan Bintan Darul Masyhur.

<sup>12</sup>There are some associations of the revived sultanates or kingdoms in Indonesia like Forum Keraton Nusantara.

Srivijaya. Bintan is one of the ‘places of origin’ of Malay civilisation since the time of Wan Sri Beni and Sri Tri Buana up to Melaka, Johor-Riau, and Lingga. In this historical period, Malay civilisation shows its magnificent achievements in culture and arts, some of which have survived until the present day.

(Aswandi Syahri 2009: ii)

Ansar accentuated Bintan’s position as the ‘place of origin’ which gives the present generation Malay traditions and heritage, that in turn serve as evidence of the narrative of continuity which places Bintan in its original position. This assertion is undoubtedly contestable from the standpoint of Palembang and Jambi according to the Malay chronicle *Sejarah Melayu* and archaeological findings in the regions.<sup>13</sup> However, what is notable in Aswandi’s study is the attempts to support such a claim. Manifestations of the effort to disseminate the idea of Bintan as the place of origin of Malay civilisation are obvious in the museum exhibitions, heritage sites, and cultural festivals, as discussed below.

One such manifestation is the Museum Bahari (Museum of Maritime Culture), on the east coast of Bintan Island, which displays its collections of miniature boats, ships, coastal settlements, and fishing equipment. The museum exhibition also has a diorama representing the lives of the people in the coastal area of Bintan to show a ‘traditional’ way of life. Museum Bahari exhibits these collections as the material aspect of a civilisation and also includes displays on the sea nomads (Orang Suku Laut), who are considered non-Malay, to show the opposite of an ideal of civilisation. Photographs, paintings, and dioramas of sea nomads illustrate ‘backwardness’ as represented by the displays of simple practices of fishing, cooking, parenting, and weddings, which are contrasted to the nomadic seafarers who have become sedentary, mainly in Berakit in northern Bintan Island.

Another example comes from the sites located around Gunung Bintan in Kampong Bukit Batu, which have become the local government’s priority. The district administration improved the burial grounds with shelters and beautified the gravestones for the benefit of pilgrims from other parts of Indonesia and the Malay world. These grave sites are respected as *keramat* (cf. Wee 1985: 375–384), sites that contain supernatural power. According to the local people, these are the graves of Dang Pok, Dang Menini, Megat Sri Rama, Dang Seri Bani, and Tok Telani, heroes and heroines found in chronicles. Dang Pok and Dang Menini refer to Wan Empuk and Wan Malini mentioned in *Sejarah Melayu* (Shellabear 1995: 16). Another grave is said to be that of the Johor admiral Megat Seri Rama, though there is yet another grave believed to be in Johor, Malaysia. Despite the contestation, what is obvious in the traditionalisation of these graves is that it connects them with narratives of continuity to strengthen the position of Bintan as the precursor of the dynasties of Temasek, Melaka, Johor, and Riau-Lingga.

Hence the idea of Bintan as the ‘place of origin’ of Malay civilisation pervades the discourse of cultural identity in the region as part of the whole narrative of continuity of the Riau Islands province. From Bintan, the story continues to Riau, which refers to the historical polities of Johor-Riau (1528–1722) and Riau-Lingga (1722–1911).<sup>14</sup> If Bintan is

<sup>13</sup>For debate on the search for the Malay origin and archaeological studies on the epigraphs found in southern Sumatra, see Andaya (2001) and de Casparis (1980).

<sup>14</sup>Several names refer to different periods of Riau. Johor-Riau in the late 17th century was when Johor built its harbour city on the upstream Carang Creek in 1673 (Andaya 1975: 104). Johor Kingdom dynasty moved its centre to the

conceived of as the ‘base’ or ‘origin’ of civilisation, Riau [or more specifically Tanjung Pinang] is promoted as the ‘peak’ or the ‘centre’ of Malay civilisation (*puncak tamadun Melayu* or *pusat tamadun Melayu*).

Tanjung Pinang’s administration sponsored projects to renovate graves and preserve remnants of the royal settlement located upstream at Sungai Carang (also known as Sungai Riau), which include the tombs of the viceroy of Riau-Lingga sultanate (Yamtuan Muda), Daeng Marewa (r.1722–1728), Daeng Celak (r.1728–1745), and Daeng Kamboja (r.1745–1777). The government has improved the graveyard with painted shelters, and built a gate to access the royal grave complex. Penyengat Island, the former base of the 19th-century vice royal palace, is the other site where structures and remnants of buildings are preserved. The Indonesian government declared the island a national heritage site in 2018.

Tanjung Pinang town’s Museum Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alamsyah (Sultan of Riau-Johor, 1722–1760) preserves and exhibits manuscripts written or copied on Penyengat. The museum has also displayed silver coins that had once served as local currency, a replica of an item of royal regalia (*cogan*), weapons (*kris*), dioramas of a wedding ceremony, and *mak yong* theatre props. The exhibition presents the narrative that Malay civilisation reached its previous peak via achievements represented by the coins (trade), regalia (sovereignty), manuscripts (literary tradition), diorama (ritual and ceremony), and *mak yong* (entertainment). *Mak yong* properties such as masks, costumes, and musical instruments form a display that shows it as being one of the entertainment forms developed under the patronage of the royal palace on Penyengat in the second half of the 19th century (Figure 2). The display implies a story connecting *mak yong* theatre with the narrative of Riau, and states in its caption, *mak yong* ‘came to Bintan through the kingdom of Riau-Lingga’ and ‘was performed to amuse the nobles at the palace’. Further, only ‘in its later development, *mak yong* turned to become folk theatre’.

The narrative of Riau, however, gives importance to the Malay-Bugis viceregal family and their descendants on Penyengat. This tendency has implicitly perpetuated tensions between the viceregal family and the Malay sultan and his family on Lingga Island. The current groups of performers, cultural workers based in Lingga, as well as the district government of Lingga, have responded to the dissemination of the idea of Riau by promoting their own countervailing viewpoint, in which Lingga takes precedence.

The narrative of Lingga refers to the historical polity in Daik on Lingga Island made as the settlement for the royal family of Riau-Lingga. The story is told from the viewpoint of the Malay sultan’s dynasty and is emphasised by their moving of the name of ‘Lingga’ to the front of the dynasties’ name: Lingga-Riau-Johor-Pahang (1787–1824) and Lingga-Riau (1824–1900).<sup>15</sup> The local administration and cultural workers drive the attempts to assert Lingga as the ‘motherland of the Malays’ (*Bunda Tanah Melayu*). Here, the term ‘mother’ refers to the idea of ‘base’, ‘place of origin’, and the place to which one returns. This title was first coined in 1997 at the Perkampungan Penyair gathering of

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upstream area of Riau Creek during the period of Riau-Johor (1722–1787). It then, moved further south to Lingga, when it was known as Riau-Lingga-Johor-Pahang (1787–1824), before the London Treaty of 1824. After the treaty, it was known as Riau-Lingga (1824–1911) and Riau was under control of the Bugis-Malay vice royal family on Penyengat Island. Since 1900, the seat of the sultan in Lingga moved to Penyengat Island.

<sup>15</sup>The perspective from Lingga looking at Malay history has been a concern of one of the descendants of the royal family in Lingga, who wrote *Kerinkasan Sedjarah Melayu* (Matheson 1986).



**Figure 2.** Mak yong properties in the display of Tanjung Pinang town's Museum Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alamsyah. © Alan Darmawan.

Malay authors from across the Malay world, which was initiated by the Federation of Associations of National Writers of Malaysia (GAPENA) and organised by the Centre for Malay Studies of Universitas Riau. The participants described their presence in Daik, the former base of the Malay sultan in Lingga, as if being on one's mother's lap (Rejab F.I. 2000). They showed their admiration for the Lingga people's way of life – which they regarded as 'pure' and 'authentically' Malay in terms of language, cooking, housing, hospitality, and the like – in their writings such as poems and travelogues, which was published as an anthology, titled *Daik Bonda Tanah Melayu* (Rejab F.I. 2000). In 2012, with the help of local cultural workers who revisited the expression 'Bonda Tanah Melayu', the district government formalised it to become the title of Lingga District and inserted it into Lingga's official logo.<sup>16</sup>

Lingga District subsequently sponsored local initiatives to promote this narrative of Lingga and make itself fit to carry the reputation of being the Malay motherland. Its Department of Culture built and administers Museum Linggam Cahaya. The main exhibition of the museum conveys the narrative of Lingga as the former place of the sultan's throne with its food supply, military defence, and resistance against the Dutch in Tanjung Pinang. The historical figure that represents the glory of Lingga is Sultan Mahmud Riayat Syah (r.1761–1812). The district of Lingga nominated Sultan Mahmud to obtain the Indonesian national hero status, which took about five years when President Joko Widodo bestowed this title in November 2017.<sup>17</sup> The local administration established a committee to compose the historical narrative that justified the proposal for the nomination. The narrative about Sultan Mahmud mainly emphasised his life story, including

<sup>16</sup>This title has been officially inserted into the official logo of Lingga District through the Local Regulation No. 20 of 2012. Subsequently, the provincial administration adopted the title for the Riau Islands Province.

<sup>17</sup>The whole process of (re)nomination included lobby between political elites of Riau Islands and Jakarta. Another case of the making of national hero from Lombok indicates that the category of national hero (*pahlawan nasional*) has become more political in the past two decades (Fogg 2019).

his fight against the Dutch in Melaka, and his success in driving the Dutch troops away from the waters of Tanjung Pinang with the help of the Ilanun people from northern Borneo, before subsequently moving south to Lingga Island (Abdul Malik et al. 2017: 12). The story of the sultan's move is an important part of the idea of Lingga, because it was there that he was able to hold a consistently anti-Dutch political stance, and made initial efforts to build a military base and new centre for the Malay political realm. Cultural workers and political leaders recently exaggerated this story to signify the move of power centre from Riau to Lingga.

The narrative of Lingga marks the last 'glorious' era of Riau-Lingga before the centre moved to Penyengat and was dissolved by the Dutch in 1911. Instead of looking at the discontinuity, the narrative of traditionalisation connects the era of Malay kingdoms with the present-day Riau Islands. The narrative of continuity denotes a direct link, through which the predecessors are regarded as having passed down traditions to the present generation of Riau islanders. 'Erecting the submerged tree trunk' implies an effort of the present generation to revive the 'glory' that the ancestors achieved, which entails the reinstatement of tradition. In the case of *mak yong*, the district and provincial authorities play an important role in the current development of the tradition.

### Traditionalisation and reinstatement of *mak yong* practice

We now turn to look at how the construction of the narrative of continuity is deployed to traditionalise and reinstate *mak yong* theatre practices. An example of the act of traditionalising *mak yong* is that of Aswandi Syahri (2005: 41–44) who narrates the account of this theatre form's link to the Malay sultan in Lingga. In this account, it was Sultan Mahmud Riayat Syah (Mahmud III), ruling Lingga-Riau-Johor-Pahang, who heard about a *mak yong* troupe residing on Tekong Island near Singapore in 1789. Sultan Mahmud invited the troupe to perform in the royal house in Lingga. According to Aswandi, an envoy, Laksamana Muhammad Yusuf, successfully brought the troupe in 1811 in the reign of Sultan Abdul Rahman Syah (r.1811–1831). As the story goes, the performance is said to have taken place over 15 days in 1826 at the royal court at Damnah, after which the troupe allegedly visited Penyengat Island. The account continues and explains that during the time in Daik, Awang Keladi, who was the leader of the troupe, died and was buried in the village of Kuta on the banks of the Daik river.

Despite the many details given in the account, it lacks historical evidence supporting the narrative. The intricacy begins by stating that 'we cannot find out when exactly *mak yong* came to Riau Islands' (Aswandi Syahri 2005: 38). Then, he gathered from the 'stories told by a senior performer, the late Tuk Atan' (1936–2003), and reconstructed an account about Awang Keladi's widow, Ungu, who remarried and stayed in Singapore from 1827 until 1830 before her return to Mantang Island, south off Bintan, where she developed *mak yong* with her husband, Darus (Aswandi Syahri 2005: 43–44). It is unclear how the exact dates came to the story. Tuk Atan's son, Satar, who is leader of a *mak yong* troupe in Bintan, asserts that Ungu was his grandmother and pointed to a recently published newspaper article containing her photograph with a *mak yong* troupe at a royal palace in Penyengat. The photograph published circa 1915 (KITLV 181899), shows that Ungu looks to be younger than a middle-aged woman. With uncertain information about Ungu's lifetime and no historical evidence, Aswandi's narrative, therefore, should

be seen as the traditionalisation of *mak yong*. Moreover, the narrative also shows how cultural objects and practices in Bintan are turned into cultural representation at an administrative level. As one of the districts in the Riau Islands province, Bintan has made *mak yong* an iconic art form because

after the establishment of new administrative territories,<sup>18</sup> it is unavoidable that the administrative boundaries will consequently divide the ownership of traditional arts as cultural heritage, which we bring forward as identity markers to be proud of ... The only traditional theatre form that is still left ... and worthy for us to promote as an art form that will become a distinct identity marker in the near future is the traditional theatre *mak yong*.

(Aswandi Syahri 2005: 1–2)

The significance of identity markers as indicated above is that it constitutes the traditionalised identity of Bintan, celebrated through a number of cultural festivals. The Department of Tourism and Culture, which organises such events, involved local artists to stage art forms regarded as the cultural heritage of Bintan. A few examples in 2017 include Festival Teater Bintan and Festival Sungai Enam staging Malay *gambus* music, the social dance *joget dangkong* by female dancers, a local form of drama called *celoteh*, and *mak yong*. It is the department that endorsed the iconic form of traditional arts and chose *mak yong* as an artistic icon representing Bintan District. A display in the office building of the Department of Tourism and Culture shows a set of *mak yong* props, huge posters, a brochure for tourist promotion, and a VCD of *mak yong* performances.

In Tanjung Pinang, the municipal administration sponsors cultural festivals that involve *mak yong* groups to celebrate the historical Riau and its cultural heritage. At Festival Bahari Kepri in 2017, Syafaruddin, the leader of a *mak yong* troupe from Tanjung Pinang, Yayasan Konservatori Seni (hereafter YKS), introduced the art form to the audience. He pleaded with the audience to take care of *mak yong* as their inheritance by emphasising the status of the art form as an intangible heritage that even UNESCO has recognised (Figure 3). Syafaruddin was referring to UNESCO (2006: 64) marking *mak yong* from Malaysia as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005. The international and contested status of *mak yong* is a concern for Syafaruddin and others, even as he presents internationalisation as a positive achievement:

our *mak yong* has reached Thailand and even been to Bali, thanks be to God for that. We have performed it in Jambi, and simply, all over Indonesia. The last time was in Yogyakarta. Thanks be to God, our *mak yong* has been introduced to others, from Medan to Bali ... and we knew already, we are happy and proud that our *mak yong* has been acknowledged worldwide ... certified, yet not upon us, but upon Malaysia. However, Malaysia kindly recognises that *mak yong* is our shared heritage.<sup>19</sup>

The use of the word *kite* ('our') in the speech implies an effort to inculcate a sense of belonging. It also expresses pride in his enumeration of several locations that implies

<sup>18</sup>After *reformasi*, Bintan District split to become several districts that constitute the Riau Islands province.

<sup>19</sup>Speech by Syafaruddin at Festival Bahari Kepri, 25 October 2017 in Tanjung Pinang:

*Mak yong kite ni lah sampai ke Thailand, mak yong kite ni lah sampai ke Bali, alhamdulillah ke Bali lah sampai. Lah sampai ke Jambi, dah sampai, keliling, keliling Indonesia. Yang terakhir adalah di Jogjakarta. Alhamdulillah mak yong kite ni dikenal luas, dari Medan sampai ke Bali ... Dan kite dah tau, cukup bahagie, cukup bangga, kerne mak yong kite ni sudah diakui dunie ... cap, tapi bukan name kite, name Malaysia punye, tapi urang Malaysia ni bebaek hati tau, die bilang mak yong ni milik kite besame.*



**Figure 3.** Female attendant Inang Pengasuh and heavenly princess, birdwoman Nang Nora in the play of *Wak Perambun* performed by Yayasan Konservatori Seni at Festival Bahari Kepri in Tanjung Pinang, 15 October 2017. © Alan Darmawan.

*mak yong* and his troupe's reputation and experience. It indicates attempts to increase attention to *mak yong*. In the context of the festival, *mak yong* was one of the features to show the audience how cultural heritage is linked to the Riau narrative by presenting contests, a parade, exhibitions, and art performances. All displays, practices, and performances, such as poetry reading, theatre, dance, and music, aimed to bring a different story from Bintan. These performances attempt to popularise the narrative of Riau and monumentalise cultural inheritance attributed to it.

At Festival Bahari Kepri, for instance, a boat race and boat parade took place on Carang Creek. Singers, dancers, musicians, actors, and poets performed on the main stage located in the front yard of the former Dutch resident's office in Tanjung Pinang. Also on the main stage, school children from Bintan and Tanjung Pinang participated in a contest of the recitation of Raja Ali Haji's aphoristic poem *Gurindam Duabelas*. The idea of the 'peak of civilisation', to a significant extent, focuses on Malay literary tradition from 19th-century Riau-Lingga. Raja Ali Haji (1809–1872) is both the most respected writer and the author of *Gurindam Duabelas*, which Tanjung Pinang's authority promoted as official cultural representation. Tanjung Pinang made *Gurindam Duabelas* and the art of *pantun* into iconic cultural forms and declared itself 'the Town of Gurindam' and 'the Country of Pantun' (*Tanjung Pinang Kota Gurindam, Negeri Pantun*).

Malay poets, activists, and Tanjung Pinang's administration promote literary tradition as the paramount achievement of cultural life. To connect the literary production to the past, groups of poets derive the genealogy of the tradition from Raja Ali Haji and the Malay authors from Penyengat from the mid 19th century up to the early 20th century. The ideas of 'base', 'source', and 'ancestor' have become apparent since the poets draw a link connecting themselves with the respected Malay authors from the era of Riau-Lingga, such as Raja Ahmad, Haji Ibrahim, Raja Khalid Hitam, and



**Figure 4.** Mak yong performance by the Yayasan Konservatori Seni troupe, Festival Perhelatan Memuliakan Tamadun Melayu in Daik, Lingga, 25 November 2017. © Alan Darmawan.

Aisyah Sulaiman to name a few (e.g. Aswandi Syahri 2003; Abdul Kadir Ibrahim 2004; Tim Penyusun 2015). Hence the act of traditionalisation gives authority to this narrative (Mould 2005: 257); and positions the above authors as the founders of the Riau Malay literary tradition.

In Lingga District, the local government celebrated the narrative of Lingga. They organised the International Festival of Dignifying Malay Civilisation (Perhelatan Memuliakan Tamadun Melayu Antarbangsa) in 2017 to popularise the story and celebrate the success of their nomination of Sultan Mahmud Riayat Syah as *pahlawan nasional*. The festival organisers invited participants to join a ritual practice, *mandi safar*, and to enjoy watching traditional games, such as kite flying (*layang-layang*) and spinning tops (*gasing*). Every night on the main stage of the festival, artists performed various kinds of dances, music, and theatre like *bangsawan* and *mak yong*. A YKS *mak yong* troupe took part in the event (Figure 4).

In sum, traditionalisation reinstates *mak yong* practices with support from the local government through cultural festivals, which are now regular events that provide occasions to perform. The uncertainty of financial assistance – due to political instability in bureaucratic institutions – does not assure material support for *mak yong* production. However, the reinstatement of *mak yong* has support in some ways by other agencies, such as the national government, local and national television companies, or local and international researchers looking for source materials. The latter are outsiders who contribute to the reinstatement and the development of the tradition.

## Outsiders' support: grants, authentication, and institutionalisation

In what way do the outsiders support the traditionalisation of *mak yong*? Here I look at the roles of the state in providing funding for groups of artists. Then, we turn to discuss the way other agents such as researchers and NGOs act as authenticators. Lastly, I will demonstrate how the state formalises *mak yong* as official heritage that is managed by the state institution. These are tied to the efforts of traditionalisation.

The distribution of state grants both encourage and control the expression of local cultures. The state has pushed the bureaucratisation of local groups of performers, by requiring them to gain formal status to apply for certain grants. This includes government registration and setting up a formal organisational structure, using the public notary's registration number, tax identification number, and setting up bank accounts.<sup>20</sup> None of this was a feature of grassroots performance groups in the past. Hence the state has driven *mak yong* groups to bear the legal status of a formal organisation, thereby introducing certain norms to the groups. For example, those who are named in the organisational structure have to be involved in the decision-making processes or, at least, must be informed about them. This aims to foster transparent financial management in groups which receive state funding. However, the groups' leaders often delegate organisational positions to members of their own families, creating tension since the leaders conceive of *mak yong* funds and properties at the training centre as family assets.

Several directorates of the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a call for applications for grants and appointed the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Values (Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya [BPNB] Kepulauan Riau) to assess the applications. The Directorate of Belief in One God and Tradition (Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan yang Maha Esa dan Tradisi) distributes grants under the scheme Facilitating Cultural Communities in Society (Fasilitasi Komunitas Budaya di Masyarakat [FKBM]). Meanwhile, the Directorate of Arts (Direktorat Kesenian) from the same ministry distributes a grant called the Grant of Indonesian House of Culture (Bantuan Rumah Budaya Nusantara/BRBN). Both grants range from 100 to 150 million rupiah (EUR 6,080 to 9,125).<sup>21</sup>

*Mak yong* groups in Mantang (Sanggar Bungsu Sakti, hereafter SBS) and Kijang (Sanggar Mak Yong Warisan [SMW]) received FKBM funds in 2013 and 2014, and another group in Tanjung Pinang, YKS, received BRBN funds in 2015. Reports to the Ministry of Education and Culture stated that the groups spent most of the money on renewing their equipment as the state encourages the groups to become not-for-profit institutions. Nevertheless, comments from performers suggested that a few main personnel who led the groups included in their personal expenditure the cost of leaving their other jobs as they had to concentrate on *mak yong* production. For the recipients, grants from the state also mean recognition. Outsiders' acknowledgment is now important, and the troupes presume that by receiving grants, they obtain recognition from outsiders. Conversely, these outsiders are also new consumers or mediators of the art form to

<sup>20</sup>Requirement of a formal organisation is based on the law concerning civil society organisation, Law No. 85 of 1985, which has been amended in Law No. 17 of 2013. See Article 12 of the Law No. 17.

<sup>21</sup>All the currency conversions in the rest of this article are based on the exchange rate (provided by European Commission) during the actual time period of the distribution of grants or other payments. See InforEuro: <[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/how-eu-funding-works/information-contractors-and-beneficiaries/exchange-rate-infoureuro\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/how-eu-funding-works/information-contractors-and-beneficiaries/exchange-rate-infoureuro_en)>.

larger audiences. These actors include not only the state institutions, but also researchers and television companies.

Researchers come to the Riau Islands to collect primary source materials and to commission live performances. The typically 30-minute duration for *mak yong* performances at cultural festivals is seen as ‘incomplete’. Because of this, researchers have commissioned some troupes to perform selected plays for time-specific durations regarded as sufficient. Even though these research visits are less frequent than government-sponsored cultural festivals, they provide the opportunity for troupe leaders to negotiate aspects of the stage performance, including fees. Unlike local authorities that apply a certain rate based on their budget, some outsiders bargain with *mak yong* leaders for staging a performance. To a certain extent, the researchers’ interest contribute to groups’ abilities at keeping the art form active, which benefits the local artists.

Exchanges between researchers and local artists have become a business for the leaders of *mak yong* groups. The first time I met with the leader of SMW, Satar, he asked if I wanted to commission a performance and indicated that we could negotiate everything to do with the performance as long as the fee was suitable. However, once I made clear that I intended to study the production as it was taking place, Satar did not pursue the issue. The video recordings that I took were from public performances at cultural festivals. In addition, requests for performances in the eyes of local artists are not solely an occasion from which they can earn, but also an event at which they show off to the audience that their production of *mak yong* has received recognition even from those outside the region.

A scholar at Universitas Indonesia and cultural activist, Pudentia Maria Parenti Sri Suniarti, established the Oral Tradition Association (Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan [ATL]) in 1993, in order to study and document oral tradition. Pudentia returned to the Riau Islands in 2008 with a grant from the Ministry of Tourism to commission performances of three groups of *mak yong* from Batam, Kijang, and Mantang Island. The video recordings of the last two groups can be found in Leiden University Library (BVK3 7001 A 26, KITLV4 D CD2730, and KITLV4 D CD 5127), in which both recordings contain incomplete performances of *Megat Muda* [The prince Megat Muda] and *Gunung Berintan* [Mount Berintan] stories.<sup>22</sup> Pudentia’s undertakings through the ATL also promoted the authentication of *mak yong*. In a workshop presentation on cultural heritage in Malaysia, she divided *mak yong* theatre tradition into two categories. The first is the one that ATL considers authentic and had been ‘preserved for research purposes’. The second category is those that are to be developed ‘for tourists’ with performances that last for about 10 to 15 minutes as a condensed version ‘without subtracting the essence of *mak yong* theatre’.<sup>23</sup> In my view, this second category represents the idea of exoticising and commodifying *mak yong* to adjust it to the tourists’ tastes. The first category, however, indicates the act of authenticating *mak yong*, of establishing what is the ‘original form’, according to an external observer.

<sup>22</sup>There is no exact content of the *Raja Megat Muda* story as the performance included only the prelude and part of the story, so it is not clear where the story led. The *Gunung Berintan* tale is also known as *Raja Bungsu Sakti* [The young magical prince], which recounts the Prince of Negeri Lenggang Cahaya wandering to Negeri Gunung Berintan and marrying the princess of the kingdom.

<sup>23</sup>I paraphrase a part of Pudentia’s talk that ATL published officially as documentation in October 2011. See ‘Tradisi Lisan Sebagai Warisan Budaya oleh Dr Pudentia MPSS Video 1’, <<https://youtu.be/QAvz8NiLZG4>> Accessed 30 April 2021.

Authentication of *mak yong* is also carried out by state institutions. The central government institutionalises Intangible Cultural Heritage (Warisan Budaya Tak Benda) through the Education and Culture's Ministerial Regulation 106 of 2013.<sup>24</sup> According to Article 2 of this regulation, there are five categories of intangible heritage that the government officially and systematically registers, inscribes, and declares as national heritage.<sup>25</sup> These include oral tradition and oral expression; performing arts; customs and rituals and celebrations; knowledge and practices regarding nature; and handicraft. As the regulation mandates, the General Directorate of Culture of the Ministry of Education and Culture set up a committee of specialists (Tim Ahli Warisan Budaya Tak Benda or the Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage) and renews it every two years. The committee, in this mechanism, declared 77 items as national heritage on the official list in 2013, one of which was *mak yong* from the Riau Islands, within the category of oral tradition.<sup>26</sup>

Earlier, in 2010, there was an effort to nominate *mak yong* at the international level. This was through the nomination of four handwritten notebooks of *mak yong* plays<sup>27</sup> to the Committee for the UNESCO's Programme of the Memory of the World (Figure 5). In the application proposal jointly submitted by the Indonesian National Committee of the Memory of the World and the ATL,<sup>28</sup> the nominators emphasised the originality and authenticity of the booklets that served as proof of the beginning of the tradition in the Riau Islands (Part A). The nominators claimed that the booklets were composed during the early 20th century, and stressed the initiative of the local people who composed them, without any involvement from the Dutch colonial rule in the region at the time. In fact, the booklets contain no indication of the time of writing, but the nominators argue that the books are 'unique' and 'original'.<sup>29</sup> In any case, despite the nominators' stress on the booklets' uniqueness, peculiarity, and locality, the UNESCO adjudicators did not agree. In the tenth meeting of the International Advisory Committee (IAC) of the Memory of the World Programme in Manchester (UK), the committee decided that

Mak yong was declared in 2005 by UNESCO to be a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage. The manuscript itself, dating from the early 20th century, is unique in presenting theatrical performances, songs, and dances, with instructions and narrations. While recognizing the value of a unique documentation of a performance that had been passed down by oral means, the IAC was not convinced that international significance had been adequately reflected in the nomination.

(UNESCO 2011: 22)

Despite this rejection, there is still a determination to renominate *mak yong* at the international level. Pudentia, who was one of the members of the Indonesian Committee for

<sup>24</sup>Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia No. 106 Tahun 2013 tentang Warisan Budaya Tak Benda.

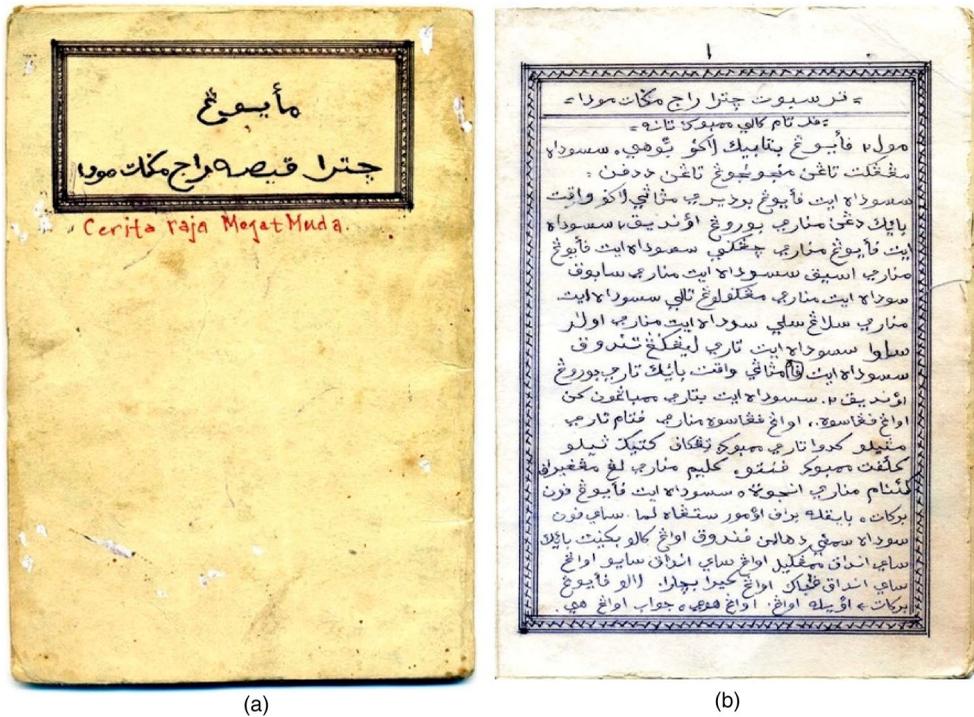
<sup>25</sup>Articles 5, 6, and 7 of the Regulation No. 106 of 2013 regulates the procedures and mechanism of registration (*pendaftaran*), inscription (*pencatatan*), and declaration (*penetapan*) of the intangible heritage.

<sup>26</sup>Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Ministrial Decree) Nomor 238/M/2013 tentang Warisan Budaya Tak-benda (Intangible Cultural Heritage) Indonesia Tahun 2013.

<sup>27</sup>For the content of the manuscripts, see Darmawan (2023: 174–177).

<sup>28</sup>The Memory of the World Register, Mak Yong Documentation (Indonesia), Ref. no. 2010-66.

<sup>29</sup>Al azhar, who studied *mak yong* in 1989 especially Tuk Atan's troupe in Kijang, had not found such small booklets except for Tuk Atan's notes of plays and instructions written in roman script in a 100-page notebook (Interview with Al azhar, 10 September 2020; see also Al azhar's report (1989) in KITLV3 M i 40481989 mf.



**Figure 5 (a and b).** Cover and inside page of one of four booklets that contains *mak yong* plays and instructions for the performance of *Cetera Raja Megat Muda*. Dimensions: 21 × 15.5 cm, with an average of 21 lines per page, and written with ballpoint. Courtesy of ATL through Dr Dick van der Meij.

the Memory of the World, affirmed the plan of renominating *mak yong* as world heritage, in particular to stress its difference from Malaysia's *mak yong*.<sup>30</sup> Pudentia's explication reveals that the desire for international recognition is motivated by the wish to establish a legal claim of Indonesian ownership of cultural property vis-à-vis Malaysia, through registration, declaration, and certification of the intangible cultural heritage. This stance is rooted in political and cultural contestations between the nation states of Indonesia and Malaysia (cf. Chong 2012; Clark 2012), and differs significantly from Malay communities' consciousness of sharing cultural heritage across national borders. These attitudes illustrate that the cultural configurations that the Indonesian state has shaped are different from those of the Malay world. Between these two arrangements, the Malay activists and artists in the Riau Islands build their networks to participate in the Malay world as well as be part of Indonesia.

Networking and mediation maintain support for *mak yong* along with the authentication and institutionalisation. ATL has mediated *mak yong* tradition and its performers to academia in Australia and Europe. The performers take advantage of experience in performing the art form overseas and in gaining acknowledgement from communities outside Riau Islands. However, the limited financial support required a smaller group

<sup>30</sup>Pers. comm. with Pudentia in Leiden, December 2019.

of performers traveling to Monash University in Melbourne in 2015<sup>31</sup> and Naples' University L' Orientale in 2013.<sup>32</sup> Pudentia chose SMW led by Satar. With such experience, the chosen troupe can claim to have external recognition and can accuse other groups of being 'inauthentic'. Pak Gani (1942–2019), the leader of SBS, countered the accusation of inauthenticity by asserting the 'authenticity' of his group. In my visit to Mantang, Pak Gani told me about his experiences in staging *mak yong* over the course of a few nights in a wooden shed with kerosene lamps for lighting, which Singaporean theatre producer Zai Kuning commissioned in 2013. Zai spent a week in Mantang with the performers, interviewing them, and recording a *mak yong* performance, resulting in a recorded performance over two consecutive evenings at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Singapore in 2014.<sup>33</sup> This expanded the audiences from the Riau Islands to academics in Australia and Italy and also tourists in Singapore. Hence the outsiders play roles in the authentication of *mak yong*.

The ICA screening marked a new way of presenting *mak yong* – on the screen. Such recordings promote *mak yong* and also serve as a revenue stream for the artists. But as well as allowing *mak yong* to reach wider audiences, the media limits the duration of its presentation. Indonesian commercial television station METRO TV commissioned a *mak yong* performance for recording in mid October 2017. Kijang-based Malay activist Mustafa Abbas suggested that the METRO TV crew record the SMW group. With his previous experience in a recording commissioned by the regional branch of the national television network TVRI, Satar commanded a fee of 4 million rupiah (EUR 245). This is a profitable income that the performers could earn with less intensive rehearsal and production costs. The recording process was also relaxed, and the director requested that some sections be repeated. The group played only the prelude sequence including dialogue between the king and the male royal attendant, Awang Pengasuh. The recording was included in a special coverage of Malay culture and the Riau Islands in a programme called *IDENESIA* (an acronym from *Ide untuk Indonesia* [ideas for Indonesia]). Aired on television and uploaded online on YouTube, the programme featured *mak yong* in one section that lasted about two and a half minutes.<sup>34</sup> It was merely a short clip combined with other cultural forms from the Riau Islands. Another commercial television station, CNN Indonesia, recorded a *mak yong* performance by the YKS group in 2018 for special coverage as well.<sup>35</sup> This mediation indicates that *mak yong* is not merely presented for locals but the more general public of Indonesia and anyone who wants to see it on the Internet. Hence the mediation, to a certain extent, impacts the art form and groups of artists and the presentation of *mak yong*.

<sup>31</sup>The performance in Melbourne was held in conjunction with the Second Symposium of the Malay Musical Arts of Indonesia's Riau Islands, 14–6 Jan. 2015 (cf. Kartomi 2019: x–i).

<sup>32</sup>*Mak yong* performance was at the Indonesian cultural event (exhibition, seminar, and performing art) at the Department of Asian, African, and Mediterranean Studies, University of Naples, The Orientale, 10–11 November 2013.

<sup>33</sup>Some of the stories I heard from Pak Gani, while others came from a note that Zai Kuning wrote on his blog titled 'Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk'. <<https://dapuntahyang2018.wordpress.com/transmission-of-knowledge-they-get-up-from-their-knees-and-walk/>> accessed 2 May 2021. See part of Zai Kuning's recordings: <<https://vimeo.com/75733685>> accessed 2 May 2021.

<sup>34</sup>See *mak yong* here <<https://youtu.be/vz-0BqHOGRE>> between 5:00 and 7:31. Accessed 2 May 2021.

<sup>35</sup>See *mak yong* here <[https://youtu.be/t\\_7\\_3E35C8g](https://youtu.be/t_7_3E35C8g)> between 11:08 and 16:58. Accessed 2 May 2021.

## Groups of artists, community support and commercialisation

What is the impact of traditionalisation on *mak yong* troupes? One troupe, SBS, relies on the support of the local community, while the SMW and YKS groups, commercialise it with the label *tradisi* ('tradition'). This originated from attempts to traditionalise *mak yong* as an identity marker of the Riau Islands through narratives that connect the art form with the past, as well as processes of authentication and institutionalisation. The performers utilise the sensitivity and nostalgic feelings for 'tradition' to promote *mak yong* to the public. However, groups of performers market themselves differently. As we shall see below, they set different fees because of claims to tradition, have different group sizes and other factors play a role such as spatial context and community support.

From his experience in performing commissioned *mak yong* with his SMW, Satar has set a fixed tariff for group performances. The rate is applied as a minimum fee, which is 4 million rupiah (EUR 235; October 2017). It covers all expenses for the performance, such as cosmetics for female performers, travel cost to the location, musical instruments (counted as rental property), honorarium for himself as the leader, and honorarium for actors according to their roles. For example, the actors playing the clown and the king were paid 200,000 rupiah (EUR 12.60), while the ladies-in-waiting received 50,000 rupiah (EUR 3.15). This shows how money is distributed, with Satar receiving more than the others because he is the leader and receives the fee for the rental of the musical instruments. Compared to other music and dance entertainment forms in the region, Satar's rate is higher. For example, Sanggar Joget Dangkong Melayu Serumpun Bersatu, a Malay music and dance group from the east coast of Bintan Island, charges a lower rate to compete with popular music on the electronic keyboard for karaoke of one to three singers known as *organ tunggal*. The leader of the group, Pak Sumadi, charges about 800,000 rupiah (within their village), and 1.2 million rupiah to play away from the village (EUR 50.35 to 75.50; October 2017). Consisting of at least four male musicians and four female dancers, the group competes with *organ tunggal* by applying approximately the same rate. For a *mak yong* group like the SMW, the music and dance group with its eight to twelve performers can set a lower rate. Yet *mak yong*, with 18 to 20 performers, cannot apply the same charge. Satar's rate is not affordable for a typical wedding party or any private celebration. Therefore, Satar relies mostly on the public performances that the local government and media companies may request. The occasions in which the groups perform vary following the government's project and television programme. Satar found benefit in marketing his group as performing the 'traditional' or 'authentic' forms of *mak yong*.

Unlike the SMW, the YKS group has attempted to package *mak yong* as popular entertainment. Said Fakhur ar-Razi, a young ethnomusicologist who graduated from the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI) Yogyakarta, leads the management of the troupe. In 2019 he began promoting *mak yong* as commercial entertainment, organising a performance in the Gedung Aisyah Sulaiman city hall in Tanjung Pinang and advertising it widely, including in a short video teaser promoting the performance. This new way of presenting *mak yong* to the public in Tanjung Pinang targets a specific age group in its advertising, requires an entry ticket, and is an indoor performance. With a flyer distributed through social media, YKS set an entry fee of 20,000 rupiah per person (EUR 1.25; Mar. 2019). On the day of the event, approximately 200 people attended the performance to watch the



**Figure 6.** Mak yong performance by the Yayasan Konservatori Seni troupe at the performance hall Gedung Aisyah Sulaiman, Tanjung Pinang. Courtesy of Said Fakhur ar-Razi, Tanjung Pinang.

indoor *mak yong* stage performance. The performance took place on a proscenium stage facing the audience (Figure 6). This style of presentation differs from that of the *mak yong* stage in a wooden shed on Mantang Island or that of the style of an earthen stage with kerosene lamps as in YKS's performance in Lingga (Figure 4). This was appropriate to the target audience, which were youngsters in the urban area of Tanjung Pinang. YKS promoted this performance to students from the local universities and senior high schools. The performers are also from the same generation as the audience. The leader of the group realised that *mak yong* should be packaged as popular entertainment that youngsters perform and promote through social media to reach a younger generation.

The above presentational style with the proscenium stage in a hall is a significant change, minimising the interaction between performers and audience which is unusual and a new feature of *mak yong* performance. In contrast, Mantang-based SBS group continues to present *mak yong* – in the arena stage on the ground level – as folk entertainment on the island. They have asked for support from the villagers to stage *mak yong* on several occasions, mostly on Islamic and public holidays, like the Islamic new year and Eid al Adha. The villagers organised such events and gave financial support to the *mak yong* troupe. The school children and youngsters, who were members of the group, fundraised and collected money from the villagers. Support also came from the village government to sponsor Festival Mak Yong Mantang in 2018 and 2019, where three groups of performers of various age range within SBS participated.

The above cases, with the exception of Mantang, indicate that traditionalisation goes hand in hand with commercialisation and commodification. When commodification of *mak yong* for commercial entertainment makes use of the 'tradition' label to stimulate nostalgia, the villagers in Mantang claim to be the 'initial' place of *mak yong* tradition, and of continuing 'tradition' from the ancestors who began the tradition in the Riau Islands. Such a claim originated from recognition of the Mantang-based performers,

and their performances had been recorded in government-sponsored documentation projects of endangered traditions in the 1970s. Since then, Mantang has been known as the foremost place of *mak yong* tradition.

### Concluding remarks

‘Erecting the submerged tree trunk’ is part of Malay tradition itself, reflected in the case of reviving, recontextualising, and traditionalising *mak yong*. It is important to note that recontextualisation of tradition does not necessarily entail traditionalisation, since one can decontextualise certain practices and recontextualise them in different local socio-cultural configuration. However, traditionalisation aims to construct a narrative of continuity to connect, in this case, the present-day Riau Islands with the past. Institutionalisation and authentication of *mak yong* are part of the act of traditionalisation that justify the claim to the art form as ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ and imbue it with meaning as a marker of Malay identity. As we have seen, the local government is a major instigator of these processes. Tanjung Pinang, Bintan, and Lingga districts support the reinstatement of *mak yong* practices through projects of heritage-making and cultural festivals, and by the disbursement funds. The government does not consider *mak yong* performers professionals who make a living from their performances, but rather, are amateurs who voluntarily form their groups on a not-for-profit business structure. Local patronage of this kind emerged in the context of decentralised politics in Indonesia. The local administration has the authority to plan and execute its projects using local resources and budgets, and involve local participation. Local culture is one of the resources that the administration attends to in order to shape a traditionalised local identity. This aims to justify the claim and locate the Riau Islands in the prestigious position in the cultural configurations in Indonesia and the Malay world, which is as the heir of the originator of Malay civilisation. In this context, the Riau Islands have emerged as an important player in the politics of culture and Malay identity with the traditionalisation project.

Traditionalisation has taken place in a way that the district and provincial governments boost the narrative of continuity that connects the people, administrative territory, culture, and tradition to the past. Local identity, history, and art performance flourish through the promotion of Malay heritage and traditional practices. In response to this development of local identity formation, the central government has been attempting to control it instead of confining its stream. Besides the state, persons and institutions outside the Riau Islands also contribute to the traditionalisation of *mak yong* through grants, authentication, and institutionalisation of the art form. In this context, groups of artists formalise their organisations and training centres to be engaged with local identity formation.

Patronage takes its form in an exchange relation. The patron needs objects to make official and distinctive attributes of Malay identity. Meanwhile, the local artists need material support to sustain the revived tradition. This contributes to stimulating art production and the formation of a group of performers, including *mak yong* and its practitioners, and ultimately is behind the revival of *mak yong* that has taken place since the early 2000s. Despite *mak yong*’s revival and productivity, a *mak yong* instructor, Pak Gani, was worried about its future due to unreliable patrons. His hope was to be hired as civil servant to be able to focus on the regeneration of performers and

production of *mak yong*. The same aspiration came from Said Parman who was the head of the Culture and Tourism Agency of Tanjung Pinang, but missed the opportunity to appoint *mak yong* trainers to be paid by the government. His attempts to propagate Malay culture and identity are voluntary and personally motivated. Reflecting on establishing the YKS, he asserts that ‘every element of *mak yong* theatre is the representation of Malay culture: dance, music, pantun, language, and other aspects including costume’. While Parman recounts that through *mak yong* he trains the younger generations in the town to learn the Malay language regardless of their ethnic background, Pak Gani’s aspiration for stable support for *mak yong* performers remain unanswered.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Alan Darmawan* is postdoctoral researcher at SOAS University of London, and is currently working for the Leverhulme-funded Mapping Sumatra’s Manuscript Cultures project. Email: ad100@soas.ac.uk

## ORCID

*Alan Darmawan*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7860-810X>

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