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Alan Darmawan

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# The Revived *Mak Yong* Theatre in Indonesia's Riau Islands: Narrative and Performance Structure

*Alan Darmawan*

*Mak yong is a form of theatre that combines music, dance, story, dialogue, and slapstick comedy in its performance. The traditions of mak yong are currently practiced in Malaysia, southern Thailand, and Indonesia's Riau Islands. Focusing on mak yong that has been revived in the past fifteen years in the Riau Islands, this essay discusses the contemporary productions of mak yong and the consequences of its revival, including adjustment and limitations in its current presentation. As most of the stories in mak yong's repertoire are lost with the demise of the old performers, this article reconstructs the narrative and performance structure of mak yong based on recordings, storytelling, manuscripts, and contemporary performances.*

*Alan Darmawan is Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellow at SOAS University of London. He obtained his doctorate from Hamburg University with a dissertation on the interplay between mak yong's revival and Malay identity formation in the Riau Islands. He is currently working on manuscripts from the royal library of the former Palembang Sultanate in the Mapping Sumatra's Manuscript Cultures project.*

## Introduction

This essay discusses a form of theatre called *mak yong*, which combines elements of music, dance, story, dialogue, and slapstick comedy. The traditions of *mak yong* are practiced currently in Malaysia, southern Thailand, and Indonesia's Riau Islands (Yusof 2018; Tan and Shafii 2021; Darmawan 2021).<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on *mak yong* in the Riau Islands (Kepulauan Riau, hereafter "Kepri") with its revival in the past fifteen years, after the flourish in the late nineteenth century up to the first half of the twentieth century and the dormancy in the second half of the twentieth century (Darmawan 2021: 2). The wane of *mak yong* tradition began in the early 1960s along with the decline of art

production and economic life in Kepri. The itinerant theatre troupes, including those of *mak yong*,<sup>2</sup> in the wealthy region with the strait dollar as a currency, could not make a living since the socioeconomic ties and cross-border economic exchange between Kepri and Singapore were affected by the political turbulence between Indonesia and Malaysia (1963–1967), which led to the so-called “dedollarization” (Mackie 1974: 218; Ford and Lyons 2006: 259).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the development of modern entertainment forms in Indonesia, including cinema, made local arts fall out of favor. As the local art genres turned into nearly-extinct heritage in the context of modernization, the Indonesian state “invented,” inventoried, and categorized them as a type of “traditional art” (cf. Hatley 1993; Jones 2013: 243–247). Hence, *mak yong* was documented in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (e.g., KITLV 61641; Syamsuddin 1982; Sastrosuwondho 1985; Lumowah 1996). The situation changed in the 2000s with the decentralized politics of Indonesia, in which “traditional art” has become instrumental in expressing local culture and identity (cf. Hatley and Hough 2015). In this context of the promotion of local art genres, the present study focuses on the revived *mak yong* in Kepri.

The revival of *mak yong* has provided cultural performances the islanders in Kepri could experience currently. From the perspective of the anthropology of experience (Turner and Bruner 1986), a form of theatre is an expression of human experience, which takes a certain form to be conveyed and, in turn, (re)shapes human experience. In this sense, the revival of *mak yong* has put “experience into circulation,” in which a community re-experiences, re-lives, re-creates, re-tells, and re-constructs its culture (Turner and Bruner 1986: 11–12). In this respect, theatre performances are “occasions that are set apart from ordinary daily round of activities” or “frameworks that involve the intensification of awareness” (Lewis 2013: 4–5). According to Turner (1982: 24–25), this sphere is called liminal space in which performers and audience shape “performance text,” meaning “all that happens during a performance both on stage and off, including audience participation” (Schechner 1985: 22). Schechner notes that only what happens onstage can be passed on and repeated, implying the existence of a pattern he calls “scripts,” meaning “something that pre-exists any given enactment, which acts as a blueprint for the enactment, and which persists from enactment to enactment” (Schechner 1973: 6–7). The “script” is a kind of knowledge with its transmission, which is important to study as one of the points of contact between theatre and anthropology (Schechner 1985: 21–25). This article focuses on *mak yong*’s “script” with its manifestation in stage performance that constitutes experience for the audience and performers.

To understand *mak yong*'s "script," I will contextualize its revival in the cultural configuration, the agents involved in it (the local governments, cultural activists, and artists), the consequences of the revival, and what it means for Kepri today. Since the formation of Kepri as a province in 2004, the local governments have played a major role in promoting Malay cultural heritage as distinctive markers of local identity and tourist attractions. This effort has encouraged the revival and the current development of Malay music, dance, and theatre such as *zapin*, *mendu*, *bangsawan*, and *mak yong* (cf. Thomas 2016: 333; Kartomi 2019).<sup>4</sup> The government-sponsored cultural festivals become the opportunities for the *mak yong* performers to take the stage. The inscription of *mak yong* to the national heritage list of Indonesia in 2013 stimulated the attention of the local artists to the theatre tradition. Hence, the performers have been committed to transmitting *mak yong* to the younger generations. Currently, there are four *mak yong* troupes that are active in production, namely Sanggar Bungsu Sakti (Young Magical Troupe) in Mantang Island situated south off Bintan Island; Sanggar Mak Yong Warisan (Inheritance Mak Yong Troupe) based in the town of Kijang in the southern Bintan Island; Yayasan Konservatori Seni (Art Conservatory Foundation) in Tanjungpinang, the capital of Kepri; and Sanggar Pantai Basri (Basri Beach Troupe) in Setokok Island near Batam.

Despite the efforts of these productive creators, *mak yong*'s revival is burdened with limitations in its presentation and adjustments to the current context. While *mak yong* performances in Mantang maintain the use of a traditional stage in a form of a wooden shed (*bangsal*), most cultural festivals organized by the local governments for Indonesian tourism feature a proscenium stage. Most of the tourist festivals allot 30 to 60 minutes for *mak yong* performance. Hence, the *mak yong* troupes cannot finish a complete play, in general only performing its opening and prelude sequences. This is incomparable with the performance before *mak yong*'s dormancy that took place between two and three nights in a row, up to three hours each night. To deal with the time limit, *mak yong* performers cut or condense their performance. Of about twenty-four plays in the *mak yong* repertoire (Syamsuddin 1982: 25; Sastrosuwondho 1985: 23–24; Syahri 2005: 68),<sup>5</sup> only five stories have survived and are performed at cultural festivals. Most of the stories are lost with the demise of the old performers. Four *mak yong* plays in handwritten scripts owned by the leader of the Inheritance Mak Yong Troupe, Pak Satar, and his family are never performed on stage currently.<sup>6</sup> The manuscripts are still kept by the Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan (Oral Tradition Association) after the unsuccessful nomination to UNESCO's Memory of the World Program (MOW)

in 2010.<sup>7</sup> The audio-visual recordings from the 1970s and early 2000s, however, recorded incomplete performances. Previous studies of *mak yong* focused on describing the elements of the theatre form (Syamsuddin 1982; Sastrosuwondho 1985), reporting the attempts to revitalize *mak yong* practices (Pudentia MPSS 2010), and documenting some of its stories (Al azhar 1989). However, these studies and documentations lack an analysis of the recorded fragments' value to understanding the structure and content of *mak yong* plays in comparative manners.

The present study examines the performance structure and dramatic aspect of *mak yong*'s plays in the context of the form's revival in Kepri. I argue that its return to public performance helps bring the nuance of the Malay cultural expression to the audience. Although the narrative structure of *mak yong* has been constructed based on abridged and condensed performances, it conforms to the pattern of the traditional Malay narrative centered on the royal family and performed in a way that everything starts from the palace, then goes to the jungle or other countries, and finally back to the palace after accomplishing the mission (cf. Koster and Maier 1985). The conformity to the pattern of Malay narrative is regarded by the performers as an "authentic" Malay cultural expression.

### Sources

This study is based on the manuscripts of *mak yong* plays, audio-visual archives, storytelling, and stage performances based on what the performers remember and currently practice. There is no record of pre-1960s performance from which to reconstruct a "complete" *mak yong* repertoire. The only archives we have are some plays documented in 1977, 1999, and 2008 (see [Audio-visual recordings at Leiden](#)). The recordings I made during field research between 2017 and 2020 are mostly abridged performances, except for two condensed performances by the Art Conservatory Foundation—*Wak Perambun* (The Old Hunter Perambun, 99 minutes) and *Raja Bungsu Sakti* or (The Young Magical Prince, 109 minutes). These performances are "complete" in terms of dramatic structure despite the removal of some scenes; they were made possible as the festival organizers allotted more time for the group at Malay cultural festivals in Tanjungpinang and Lingga in October and November 2017, respectively. In both cases, members of the Art Conservatory Foundation's management team, Syafaruddin and Said Parman, were part of the festivals' organizing committees in Tanjungpinang and Lingga District. Other sources are four manuscripts of *mak yong* plays (see [Manuscripts](#)) and storytelling performed by Pak Gani, a *mak yong* instructor from Mantang, with a detailed

explanation of places, characters, performance structure, and terminologies combined with impersonation and singing (see [Audio recordings of storytelling](#)).

Since most recordings of the current performances are abridged, I have combined some sources to construct the whole narrative scheme and refer to them when discussing and summarizing *mak yong*' stories. For changes to the narrative scheme applied by a group of performers, I have added notes to them and indicated the references to the sources. The reference method employs some codes and numberings indicating the order of the sources in the bibliography. The "AV" is for the audio-visual, "AR" is for the audio recordings of storytelling, and "MS" is for manuscripts. For example, to summarize and discuss the story of *The Young Magical Prince*, I indicate the reference this way: (AR1, AV5, AV8). To access the recordings, I have included the links to my digital repositories and other channels.

### Stories and Dramatic Aspects of *mak yong*

*Mak yong* reflects general characteristics of theatre in Southeast Asia, revolving around nobles with their clown-servants. It focuses on divine kings and princes who are the heroes in the plays with a close relationship with the gods (Brandon 1974: 122–123). The stories play through the main characters: the king and the prince (Pak Yong), the queen and the princess (Mak Yong), royal servants (Awang and Inang Pengasuh), and other dramatis personae. Male performers wear masks, which distinguishes *mak yong* in Kepri from that of in Kelantan and Patani. *Mak yong* plays present several settings—a royal palace, village, jungle, and the sea. Dialogues and songs are in the Malay language. The orchestra consists of musical instruments, such as a pair of horizontal gongs (*mong-mong*), a pair of one-sided drums (*gedombak*), a pair of hung-horizontal gongs, a double-sided lead drum (*gendang pengibu*), and a double-sided accompanying drum (*gendang penganak*). Among the four groups of *mak yong* in Kepri, only the Art Conservatory Foundation has a three-string fiddle (*rebab*) player. A bamboo clarinet (*serunai*) and a cymbal are occasionally used by the groups. The *mak yong* dances consist of traditional patterns of movements, such as swaying arms with small steps (*lenggang*) and swaying arms while turning the body around (*liuk*) for females; and the movements taken from the Malay martial arts (*pencak silat*) for male performers. Two ritual practices called *buka tanah* (opening the soil) and *tutup tanah* (closing the soil) open and close *mak yong* performances. A *mak yong* performance starts with *betabek*, which is a ritual-like dance and song facing the three-string fiddle.<sup>8</sup> This aims to pay salutation to the *guru* (teacher) and the audience.<sup>9</sup> A *Mak yong* play

opens with this sequence that structures the main part of the performance.

*Mak yong*'s repertoire consists of stories that focus on the life of royal family members and those loyal to them. The five stories that remain and are performed at festivals are *The Young Magical Prince*, also known as *Gunung Berintan* (Mount Berintan), *The Old Hunter Perambun*, *Putri Timun Muda* (Princess Young Cucumber), *Raja Lak Kenarong* (Prince Lak Kenarong), and *Putri Siput Gondang* (Giant Conch Princess). These stories contain the basic ideas of a Malay cultural realm, magical power, and social structure. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, who studied *mak yong* in Kelantan extensively, structured twelve stories in a "tree" model derived from *Dewa Muda* (The Young Prince Dewa Muda) as the base story (*cerita pangkal*), which developed into three, seven, and eventually twelve stories (Yousof 1982: 111–112; 2018: 51). This story "branching" seems to be intended to make up an "authentic" *mak yong* repertoire. Nonetheless, Yousof admitted that some stories are borrowed from *menora*, *wayang kulit*, and *bangsawan* (Yousof 1976: 85). In Kepri, such a "tree" model does not occur as an aspect of *mak yong* tradition; rather, the stories' diverse references point toward external sources.

*The Old Hunter Perambun*, a story about a hunter and a mythical bird woman (half woman, half bird, or *kinnari*), has a close connection with the tale *Manora* (The Birdwoman Manora), which is well-known in southern Thailand and the northern Malay Peninsula. The tale, played in a theatrical form called *manora* or *nora* or *nora chatri* (cf. Plowright 1998; Horstmann 2012), is about a hunter named Bun who captures one of the birdwomen. In Kepri, another version of the *kinnari* tale emphasizes more on the wanderings of the hunter, Wak Perambun, who is appointed by King Perak Situn (Thai: Phra Suthon) to hunt a deer in the forest but brings home the heavenly princess Nang Nora (AR4). Other stories in three of the four existing manuscripts adopt Perso-Arabic and Javanese names for their stock characters and places, including Raja Badruzzaman di Negeri Bustan Tahira (King Badruzzaman of the Abode of Bustan Tahira, MS3), Raja Temenggung Air Wangsa di Bukit Kuripan (King Temenggung Air Wangsa of Kuripan Hill, MS2), and Raja Syah Johan di Negeri Damsyik (King Syah Johan of the Abode of Damsyik, MS4). Notably, the term "Kuripan" is from Javanese Panji tales. Damsyik refers to Damascus.<sup>10</sup> These names from other cultural entities are adopted by *mak yong*, which frames these stories in the settings of the magical story world and with the standard plot of dramatic sequences. *Mak yong* stories proceed in a general schema of episodes. First, a wealthy kingdom and a just king deal with a personal crisis or anxiety. This is followed by the separation or exile of

royal family members or an entrusted man, who wander(s) through the forest or a foreign country and solve(s) the problem. This results in a positive ending and a return to order. These episodes appear with a host of motifs. Despite sharing the same motifs with other stories, the composition of a single story has developed its specific dramatic elements, tensions, and conflicts.

An example is the story titled *The Young Magical Prince* (ARI, AV8, AV10, AV13). In the kingdom of Lenggang Cahaya, Raja Bungsu Sakti finds a huge ship anchored in the harbor of his country. He instructs his servant to investigate the ship, who returns with some information and a gift. The captain and crew of the ship have brought the company of Raja Lela Muda from the country of Sebeban. They are headed for the country of Gunung Berintan to ask for the hand of Princess Rencana Muda in marriage. Bungsu Sakti's servant reports his investigation and hands the king a gift from the captain: a gold nugget. Bungsu Sakti feels insulted by the captain who claimed that the country of Sebeban is wealthier than Lenggang Cahaya. Embarrassed by the ship's crew, Bungsu Sakti intends to thwart their mission and restore his dignity. With two magical heirlooms, the forest people's cloth (*sarung Batak*) and a magical stick (*tongkat sakti*), he starts wandering and turns into a vagabond of the forest known as Pembatak. Once he arrives at Gunung Berintan's royal garden, he robs Princess Rencana Muda of her jewelry and asks for her hand in marriage. Raja Johan Syah Nyaya of Gunung Berintan and his men arrest Pembatak and put him in jail. Bungsu Sakti's mother, Jerak Jentara, comes to Gunung Berintan and morphs into a tiger to cause chaos. Having failed to defeat the tiger, Raja Johan Syah Nyaya asks Pembatak to beat the tiger and return order. When Pembatak succeeds, he is married to Raja Johan Syah Nyaya's daughter, Putri Rencana Muda, as a reward.<sup>11</sup>

In the above story, the quest aims to restore dignity based on Bungsu Sakti's promise to get rid of shame (*membasuh arang di muka*) and to take revenge (*mencuci karat di hati*). This Kepri's version is slightly different from that on the Malay Peninsula (Sheppard 1974a: 1–20), which continues with Bungsu Sakti's travels with his wife Putri Ucana (Rencana Muda) back to Lenggang Cahaya.<sup>12</sup> Emphasis on attempts to restore dignity has become a source of anxiety and denotes the crucial point of the story, from which the drama evolves. Then, the plot moves to the prince's quest for retaliation.

The drive for revenge also occurs in the story of a young prince of Negeri Setambak Bunga titled *Prince Lak Kenarong* (AR2, AV7, AV11). Raja Lak Kenarong's father, Raja Berma Sakti, marries a genie who has incarnated as a beautiful woman. The king's new wife, who desires the throne, agitates the king to sentence Raja Lak Kenarong and his

mother to death. The execution takes place in the jungle, where the executor does not behead the prince nor his mother but releases them instead. The two live in exile, where Raja Lak Kenarong finds an old man named Datuk Mersing Matapi in an orchard on the edge of the forest, who becomes his instructor in martial arts and magical skills. After completing his studies, Raja Lak Kenarong returns to Negeri Setambak Bunga, where the genie now rules the country. Tension has escalated ever since the genie obtained power. The prince battles against the usurper who deposed his father from the throne. With magical power and martial arts skills, Raja Lak Kenarong defeats the genie and restores order in the kingdom. He invites his mother back to the country and marries his teacher's daughter, Putri Nang Disun.

The dramatic sequences of the above story escalate the crisis from banishment to life in exile and finally to the battle where the prince redeems himself and takes back the throne. Such tensions also appear in *King Temenggung Air Wangsa of Kuripan Hill (MS2)*, where the titular character challenges his two sons to look for tiger milk from the heavenly kingdom. Mastan Darman, the eldest son of full royal descent, obtains the milk. The other son, Alang Baya, whose mother is from a tribe who resides in a forest called Kiwi-kiwi, kills his brother and takes the milk. However, Alang Baya cannot open the magical container. The god Betala Guru's daughter, Putri Sakerba, flies down to the earth to revive Mastan Darman. He then returns to the country to open the container and use the milk to cure his father's eyes. Mastan Darman's success makes him crown prince and his stepbrother is ostracized. In these episodic tensions, the princes' quest is a test through which their father examines their abilities to be the crown prince and loyalty to the king. In this test, the king obtains the justification he needs to select the right heir for the throne. Through this quest, Mastan Darman also gets to know that his stepbrother has fooled him and cannot be trusted as an ally.

The other stories that employ loyalty as the key theme include *The Old Hunter Perambun (AR4, AV3, AV15)* and *Princess Young Cucumber (AR3, AV1, AV16)*. Wak Perambun was appointed by king Perak Situn to look for white deer meat. He is skeptical of whether he can carry out the king's order and hunt a white deer that is currently pregnant with its first fawn, the offspring of parents who are the eldest among their siblings and live in the oldest forest. Yet, Wak Perambun has to take the task to prove his loyalty. In *Princess Young Cucumber*, Princess Timun Muda's husband is tested by her father to look for a deer in the jungle. Even though Raja Muda knows that the king wants him to fail, he has to show his loyalty and obey the order. When a forest tribe kills Raja Muda, Betala Guru revives his body.

The above themes—dignity, loyalty, and the right to power—serve as the basis from which the stories develop dramatic episodes and around which tension and conflicts occur. Regardless of the theme in an individual story, it shares motifs with the other stories as thematic blocks. A princess with her servant and ladies-in-waiting who relaxes in the royal garden (picking flowers, bathing, joking, and singing) appears in several stories. The garden is the place of encounter between the princess and the prince, who comes from another country. It is the royal garden in *King Temenggung Air Wangsa of Kuripan Hill* (MS2) where Mastan Darman encounters Betala Guru's daughters, Putri Sakerba and Putri Pinang Udara, while looking for the tiger's milk in the heavenly kingdom. In *King Syah Johan of the Abode of Damsyik* (MS4), the king infiltrates the royal garden of the Perca Kingdom while hunting and becomes acquainted and falls in love with Putri Johan Maligan.

Banishment from the country and living in exile is also a motif that appears in several stories. Raja Berma Sakti of Setambak Bunga banishes his first wife and his son, Raja Lak Kenarong. In *Giant Conch Princess* (AV9, AV17), the king, Raja Gondang, finds that his wife has given birth to a huge conch. Feeling disgraced, he drives away from the queen and the snail, who lives in exile until a baby girl comes out from it. The same motif of a giant conch living in exile also appears in *Anak Raja Gondang* (Giant Conch Prince) found in the Malay Peninsula (Sheppard 1974b: 40–62). In *Giant Conch Princess*, a girl comes out of the snail. Yet in *Giant Conch Prince*, the snail gives birth to a young boy. Despite the difference, the stories seem like two versions of the same tale.

Living in exile, feeling insulted or disgraced, succession issues, and maintaining loyalty are the critical elements of *mak yong's* dramatic stories. The crisis leads to tensions or conflicts, through which the drama denotes a contradiction or contestation of values to distinguish loyalty from treason, right heir from the usurper, dignity from humiliation, and nobility from commoner. The above stories with their crises and tensions are instantiated through *mak yong's* performance.

### **Performance Structure**

*Mak yong* practitioners perform the stories in standard sequences, which are the structure that systematically forms the actual performance. This “script” manifests itself in performance sequences arranged in this schema: giving respect (*betabek*); the king's solo dance; the king's visit to his servant's house; prelude; crisis; quest or exile; tension or conflict; solving problems; ending; and the closing dance. The schema also reflects the narrative, in which one particular unit of

the sequence should contain particular themes of the story. Based on this consideration, I have combined the first three sequences into one unit of analysis as they consist of narrative dances and songs that serve as an introductory scene to the story. Firstly, the king/prince sits cross-legged and dances—the palms raise towards the chest making a *sembah* (obeisance) and the wrists rotate out and push the palms forward with the fingers upward—while singing the *betabek* song.<sup>13</sup> The song announces the beginning of the story with stock phrases, such as *ilang goyak cerita nak timbul* (from the unknown tale, a story emerges). *Goyak, royat, or wayat* is the local variation for *riwayat* (story). As the performance starts with these words, the performers humbly pay salutation to the audience and the *guru*. Secondly, after the above ritual-like dance, the king performs a solo dance that represents his sovereignty, activities, and departure from the royal house. With the upbeat tempo of the musical accompaniment, the king dances several movements that imitate a bird flying on the beach expressing happiness (*tari asyik*) and representing some works by showing nails (*tunjuk kuku*), rolling ship ropes (*menggulung tali*), flapping waist cloth (*tari kain sebai*), and walking in a zigzag pattern like a python (*tari ular sawa*). Thirdly, the king dances what represents, and sings what announces, a travel to see Awang Pengasuh, the clown figure. The performers present these three scenes in a narrative closely connected with and cannot be separated from the story that begins from the prelude, in which the king declares his identity and gives a command (*titah perintah*) to Awang Pengasuh.<sup>14</sup>

Two opening and closing rituals designate the commencement and the closure of the performance. The rituals function symbolically as gates, through which performers and audiences enter the performance space. From the technical aspect, the rituals aim to deal with supernatural interventions, either from the spirits or people using black magic. The rituals are not generally applied by all groups due to different responses to the Islamic values considered essential in the formation of Malay identity. Islam has been an important element of Malayness for centuries, but the conservative form of Islam has other consequences in the life of cultural performance. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the democratic climate in politics and everyday life in Indonesia has given the opportunity for conservative groups of Muslim who propagate the “purification” of Islamic practices and the eradication of the practices accused of being “animistic.” Despite no direct offense to *mak yong* in Kepri, the campaign to get rid of “animistic” practices in performing arts and the trend of performing Islamic identity in everyday life have changed the attitudes towards the ritual practices in *mak yong*. Groups of *mak yong* deal with the rituals in

different ways. For example, the Inheritance Mak Yong Troupe does not apply the rituals,<sup>15</sup> while the Art Conservatory Foundation made some changes to render them Islamic. The Young Magical Troupe steadfastly performs the rituals with only a few changes, including a simplification of the rituals. The last group even consistently uses a rectangular wooden shed at the event in the village. The shed symbolizes the boundaries of the stage protected by a troupe leader (*ketua panjak*), or sometimes called shaman (*bomoh*),<sup>16</sup> from any magical intervention.

Accordingly, I examine the performance process between the two rituals, which instantiate the *mak yong* storyworld consisting of the geographical landscape, the Malay state, and the characters. The characters reflect social life in a Malay kingdom with their positions in a social structure, such as the royal servants Awang and Inang Pengasuh; the warrior Datuk Panglima; the chief of marketplace Datuk Pengulu Pekan; and the commoners such as Wak Pakih Jenang. Female performers dance some or a combination of motifs, such as picking flowers (*petik bunga*), *lenggang* and *liuk*. The male performers dance the motifs taken from martial arts movements. The masks (*topeng*) that the male performers wear are combined with movements to shape the characters, such as Awang Pengasuh with the mask of the clown figure, an elderly man with gestures of shaky hands and gray hair; and Pembatak with a scary-looking mask and rude gestures. Pembatak represents the forest people; his mask has a white-color face and black-color bumpy head, and is twice the size of the other *mak yong*'s masks.<sup>17</sup> Certain characters possess significant features in their appearance, such as Raja Johan Syah "Nyaya" (the unjust king Johan Syah), and the forest man Pembatak is said to have a frightening face and ugly and dirty teeth with yellow plaque, which is likened to fermented durian paste (*tempoyak*).

The places and landscapes are clearly defined in the storyworld. The king/prince's hall of audience in the royal house and place for leisure outside the palace are named Ledang Balai (Shimmering Hall) and Balai Peranginan (Leisure Villa). The princess/queen's audience hall is called Balai Anjung (Porch of Pavilions Hall). The village (*kampung*), orchard (*dusun*), marketplace (*pekan pesara*), forest (*hutan*), and the ocean form the environmental setting, which center around the king's abode called *negeri* (city-state). Symbolically, *negeri* is a city, which is contrary to the forest where the wildlife and forest tribes or vagabond people (Kiwi-kiwi, Pembatak, and Peran Hutan) live. The village is in the countryside of the king's abode, where ordinary people live. *Mak yong* does not use painted backdrops to help visualize the place

or settings like *bangsawan* theatre, for example, but forces the audience to imagine fictional reality through words.

In *mak yong* performance, words name places and landscapes; words also define time. As the plot moves and the settings change, the dialogues indicate whether the time is morning or noon. For example, the character of king says that it is in the morning that he comes to his servant Awang Pengasuh. The fictional storyworld works in a certain rhythm of movement as a living form, which is illustrated by music, utterances, dance, and gestures. What drives this “world” forward in symbolic and technical matters is the words. For example, the mantra *pulang pulih* (recover) recited by Betala Guru is so powerful as to revive a dead body. In *King Temenggung Air Wangsa of Kuripan Hill (MS2)*, Mastan Darman, who is killed by his stepbrother on the way back to the palace after their quest looking for tiger’s milk, has been revived by Putri Sakerba from the heavenly kingdom, the daughter of the god Betala Guru. The princess recites the mantra *pulang pulih* to revive Mastan Darman from his death. The same mantra is chanted by Betala Guru to revive the dead body of the prince Raja Muda in *Princess Young Cucumber* in his quest in the jungle. The mantra, in these scenes, represents the intervention of divine power to human life. In this play, it is the magical cue that propels stage actions and pushes forward the plot after the death of the protagonist.

The whole mantra is recited like a song. In a compelling piece of storytelling, Pak Gani in Mantang dramatized several dialogues with impersonation and sang some songs and the mantra *pulang pulih (AR3)*. Two performances of *Princess Young Cucumber (AV1, AV16)*, in which the mantra should have been sung, do not include that scene due to the shortened time allotted to the performances. However, Pak Gani’s storytelling made the context of the mantra’s recitation clear. Betala Guru declares that he wanted to revive (*pulih*) the human body as a creature that he calls “descendants” (*anak cucu*). This revival is done with allusions to betel leaf (*sirih*) that return to its stem. The other four materials also return to their original state, including areca-nut (*pinang*) returning to its cluster, lime (*kapur*) to its peel, gambier to the sap of leaves, and tobacco to a leaf. The body is revived gradually in five stages: moving (*bergerak*), sneezing (*meresin*), sitting (*duduk*), standing up (*bediri*), and finally coming back to life (*pulih kembali*). During the recitation of the mantra, Betala Guru is executing these actions in sync with the words, including sprinkling water (*renjis*) on the dead body five times. In this sense, the recitation of the mantra is performative and delivers the power of magical words. Although the mantra does not occur in all plays, this performative formula reflects the important role of words, which foreshadow and give form to the actions.

If the above magical words represent divine power, the king's words are a command (*titah perintah*) that moves the plot. The king or prince says a *titah* and his servant executes it. Words drive the plot forward, which is, in turn, embellished by music and dancing. The king's order is the call for undertakings. Awang Pengasuh executes every single command ordered by the king or passes on the king's orders to another person. Below are examples of the king's (Cik Wang) imperative words taken from the performances of *Princess Young Cucumber* ([AV1]: 14:27–15:10) and *The Old Hunter Perambun* ([AV3 (1): 36:03–36:11]).

CIK WANG: Awang, the reason for my call this morning is that I wish for you to go to Balai Anjung and meet the queen. Awang, deliver my message and tell her to prepare delicious food!

AWANG PENGASUH: Alright then, Cik Wang. If that is your order, please don't worry. I will take care of it by myself.

CIK WANG: If this is your suggestion, I instruct you to summon Wak Perambun to my presence, Awang!

AWANG PENGASUH: When would you like for this to happen, Cik Wang?

CIK WANG: Right now, Awang! Go, hurry!

The above exchange shows, in the first case, Awang executes the *titah* to meet with the queen and convey the king's message. Yet in the second case, the king orders Awang Pengasuh to summon Wak Perambun, whom the king appoints for a certain quest in the forest. It is the king's command that drives the episodes and changes the settings. Once the king conveyed his command, Awang executes it immediately. As the setting is changing, songs and dances illustrate the transition and Awang's move. The performers sing, dance, and walk circles around the stage, which indicates traveling. It could be a long-distance trip (*bejalan jauh*), a journey by a single person (*bejalan seorang senyawé*), or a journey of several people together (*bejalan berih ramai*). An individual character who travels must speak his or her intention to start the journey (*bejalan selalu*). In these instances, *selalu* means immediately, in one time, which is the style in the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. The performers also have to declare the arrival with a formulaic sentence, *kira bicara* or *berenti selalu*, meaning stop immediately, which designate an arrival, after which dialogues will start again in a different setting or place.

Dialogues in *mak yong* are colloquial and play with words to make jokes. Several jokes have become a repetitive formula and have occurred in performances as far back as video and audio recordings documenting performances in 1977 (AV15) and more recent in 1999 (AV14). An example below is one of the recurrent jokes that appears in the performance of *Wak Perambun* (AV3 (1): 13:47–14:14, 14:38–14:51).

CIK WANG: O Awang, are you blind, are your eyes defective? Even though I stood here like an island, you didn't see me at all!

AWANG PENGASUH: Didn't I tell you to move aside? You knew I wanted to pass, I wanted to slide by.

What is it that you want if you knew already but do not want to move aside? You are like a spear in a pawn-shop.

Do you think that you are beautiful? Let me see your face. Buéééh!

CIK WANG: O Awang, please take a close look at who I am, Awang!

AWANG PENGASUH: Huh! Why didn't you tell me? Why are you whacking me like a hen protecting her small chicks?

The context for the above jokes is that the king (Cik Wang) arrives in front of Awang Pengasuh's hut and asks him to come out. From the other side, Awang asked Cik Wang to come in. After a long quarrel, Awang is leaving his hut. He is dancing with his hands and the moves of the hip to the beat of the gongs. With these funny movements and walking like someone sleepy (just woke up from siesta), Awang bumps into the king, who is waiting for him while dancing with one arm akimbo and another holding a rattan stick. As Awang bumps Cik Wang, the king hits Awang with his stick while verbally accosting Awang with words such as blind, defective eyes (*jerisip, jeruluh*) that did not see a person standing like an island (*pulau*) or a coconut tree (*nyio*). Awang replies to the scolding by saying that if the king saw that Awang would bump into him, why did he not move aside. In Awang's eyes, the king looks awkward and powerless like a spear in a pawnshop (*lembing kena gadai*). Seeing that Awang did not know who he is quarreling with, the king asks Awang to take a good look at him (*kenalakan saya!*). Then, Awang replies with a joke, asking why he didn't simply say he wanted to be checked out, instead of getting mad like a hen looking after her chicks (*ayam beranak kecil*). Some audience members may find the jokes boring. However, the context of the performance and the stage action could make them comical for the audience.

The performance is shaped by the stage actions and the audience's responses. Technically, the performers act as storytellers or narrators talking to the audience. Formulaic phrases start the narration followed by the character's self-introduction to the audience and their positions.

CIK WANG: Hello, it has been a long trip, but I've just arrived at the front yard of Awang's hut. (AV5 (1): 13:15–13:23)

The above utterance is addressed to the audience. The audience finds the emergence of a character followed by the narrator's utterance attractive. Then the acting begins. Repeatedly the performers remind

the audience about the storyline throughout the performance. Repetition of a different motifs, characters, and settings will not be excessive, but rather useful to keep the audience and the performers engaged in the storyline. An example from *The Old Hunter Perambun* (AV3) illuminates such repetition. After realizing that she is pregnant, Queen Nang Kanom relates to her husband Raja Perak Situn that she is craving to eat the meat of a white deer, which is in its first pregnancy, whose parents are the eldest among their siblings, and living in the oldest forest. As the story goes, the king tells Awang about his wife's cravings and commands Awang to call Wak Perambun. Then the king orders Wak Perambun to look for such a deer by repeating the details of the desired deer. Departing for the forest from his home, Wak Perambun tells his wife about his task to look for such a deer. In the forest, he meets with the dragon Naga Berma Sakti, tell the latter his task, and asks for help. The repetition of dialogues in this story helps to keep the audience on track with the storyline until the end of the play. The ending is always returning to order, as the tensions have been solved or a mission completed. *Mak yong* performances must be finished by a closing dance, regardless of whether a play is complete or not. In the closing dance, the character of king/prince leads the actresses to perform the "Cik Milik" song and dance to pay respect to the audience. All the female performers stand in two or three rows while the king/prince is in the middle of the front row. They dance with the movements of two arms alternately, one arm akimbo while the other is extending forward with the palm upward. The extended arm sways very slowly from the side to the front of the diaphragm along with the singing of "Cik Milik." The song conveys a message to the audience that the performance is ending, and the performers pay respect to the audience. Consisting of one quatrain with an *a-b-a-b* rhyming pattern, the song ends with a couplet paying salutation to the *guru*. After "Cik Milik," the troupe's leader performs the closing ritual.

### Conclusion

The promotion of Malay art genres by the local authorities in the Riau Islands has stimulated the revival of *mak yong*. Younger performers have been involved in *mak yong* productions in four training centers. They perform mostly at government-sponsored cultural festivals organized as tourist events. However, this kind of event allots a limited duration for *mak yong* performance and effects adjustments to the new context and the purposes of festival organization. The consequences of the shortened duration between one half and two hours are that the *mak yong* troupes cut out certain parts or condense their performances. Despite these changes, this revival has brought *mak yong*'s blueprint for enactment, or "script," that is, narrative structure and dramatic aspects,

into a “performance text,” which demonstrates what happens on- and off-stage that the audience and performers can experience. Focusing on the problems of the royal family members, these dramatic aspects adhere to a certain schema: a wealthy kingdom and just king deal with a crisis or anxiety; this is followed by the separation or exile of the royal family members or an entrusted man, who wander(s) through the forest or other countries and solve(s) the problem; and this quest results in a positive ending and a return to order. The schema is performed in certain sequences starting with the dance for paying salutation to the *guru*, followed by the next sequences: the king’s solo dance, the king’s visit to his servant’s house, prelude, crisis, quest or exile, tension or conflict, solving problems, ending, and the closing dance. The current *mak yong*’s performance is different from the traditional Malay narrative and performance in the pre-modern Malay world that functioned as an exemplary text and prescribed what one should do according to ethics and values under the rule of Malay raja with his kingdom (Koster and Maier 1985: 442). Nevertheless, *mak yong*’s “script” that brings Malay cultural expression to the current performers and audience conforms to the pattern of classical Malay narrative, and is therefore regarded as “authentic.”

#### NOTES

1. A national form of *mak yong* in Malaysia has been developed at Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA) in Kuala Lumpur (Hardwick 2020: 72–74; cf. Foley and Kahn 2012). *Mak yong* in North Sumatra, which came from Kedah in the late 1890s, has hardly been practiced since the fall of its royal patronage, Serdang Sultanate, in 1946. The most recent performance of Serdang’s *mak yong* after many decades of dormancy was in December 2019 in Lubuk Pakam, Deli Serdang.

2. Of about twelve *mak yong* troupes by the early 1960s, only some performers were left in Mantang Island, Tanah Merah in Bintan Bay area, and Pulau Panjang near Batam by the 1970s (Sastrowondho 1985: 18).

3. The political confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia (*konfrontasi*) emerged as an armed conflict between 1963 and 1966, which was initiated by Indonesian’s opposition to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, especially the incorporation of north Borneo and Sarawak.

4. *Zapin* is a Malay adaptation of a perceived Arab-origin form of dance with elaborate foot movements and musical accompaniment of a lute called *gambus*. *Bangsawan* emerged as a Malay adaptation of *parsi* theatre in the late nineteenth century Penang, which developed further in Singapore, East Sumatra, and the Riau Islands, in the early decades of the twentieth century. The *bangsawan* theatre had also stimulated the creation of local forms of

theatre such as *mendu* (playing *Dewa Mendu* tale) in Natuna islands on the South China Sea and *dulmuluk* (initially performing the Malay narrative poem *Syair Abdul Muluk*) in the South Sumatra Province of Indonesia.

5. There is no exact number of stories in *mak yong* repertoire as it adopted tales from other cultural entities, including the West Sumatra kingdom of Pagaruyung (Sastrosuwondho 1985: 24).

6. The performances of one of these plays, *Raja Megat Muda* (The Young Prince Megat Muda, AV6, AV12 in References), only includes a prelude sequence (the dialogue between the king and his servant, and the princess with her servant and dayang (court lady) singing and dancing in the royal garden), ending with the closing dance (cf. AV2, AV4). It is hard to count these scenes as the instantiation of MS1 in Manuscripts because they occur in every *mak yong* performance.

7. Although the MOW's International Advisory Committee recognizes "the values of a unique documentation of a performance that had been passed down by oral means," it "was not convinced that international significance had been adequately reflected in the nomination" (UNESCO 2011: 22).

8. Of the four groups, only the Art Conservatory Foundation performs *betabek* with *rebab*. This lack of *rebab* player can explain why the groups in Kepri call *betabek* for *mengadap rebab*.

9. Guru refers to Betara Guru, Siva from the Hindu pantheon of gods (Wilkinson 1908: 70). It also means the spirits of teachers who are believed to guide the performers in a stage event.

10. Other names of dramatic personae and places in the manuscripts include Badruzzaman's wife Siti Zawayah, his counterpart Raja Malikuzzaman of Tahira Kestan, the raja's wife Siti Syamsiyah, and their daughter Badrul Asyik (MS3). These are adopted from Arabic names.

11. In the performance in Lingga by the Art Conservatory Foundation (AV5), the last motif of *The Young Magical Prince* was altered by the troupe's leader, Said Parman, to become the marriage of Raja Johan Syah Nyaya to an unknown lady proposed by Pembatak. The lady is, at the end of the play, revealed as transvestite. This change aims to make a comical ending that seems to reflect supposedly current tastes but is irrelevant to the overall mission of Bungsu Sakti's wanderings to restore his dignity and marry Putri Rencana Muda.

12. The Young Magical Troupe's instructor, Pak Gani, accounted another version of the travel of Raja Bungsu Sakti back to Lenggang Cahaya with Putri Rencana Muda as a happy ending scene (AR1). Sheppard documented another version in the Malay Peninsula elaborating more on dramatic scenes in their voyage to Lenggang Cahaya passing Pulau Mati Angin, in which an ogre kidnaps the princess and a monkey king helps Raja Bungsu Sakti save his wife. This is reminiscent of the Ramayana tale.

13. The crossdressing female actress acts as the king and sings the *betabek*, also called *lagu bonghei* (variations of its pronunciation include *bonge*, *bonghei*, *pong-we*). Practitioners in Kepri admit their ignorance of the meaning

of these Kelantanese phrases. According to Hardwick (2009: 142), the term *Bong-we* (in Kelantanese pronunciation) refers to the arena of cockfighting.

14. Pak Gani explained that there should be two clown figures, the old and young royal servants (Awang Pengasuh Tua and Muda), as he saw in the 1950s. This is also indicated by a photograph of a *mak yong* troupe in front of the palace of Riau-Lingga on Penyengat Island in the late 1890s (KITLV 181899). After the decline of *mak yong* in the 1960s, the performance of a single clown figure seems to be a solution for the lack of performers, which become an “ordinary” occurrence despite the sufficient number of young performers after *mak yong*’s revival.

15. The leader and performers of SMW stated that they do not want to engage with the spirits through the opening and closing rituals. However, recordings show the SMW’s leader Pak Satar performing the rituals as requested by the sponsor (AV16, AV12).

16. A group leader should have the capabilities to perform the opening and closing rituals and a man with this quality is often a shaman. However, the tradition in Kepri has nothing to do with the healing rituals like that of Kelantan *mak yong*/Main Peteri (cf. Hardwick 2014).

17. *Mak yong*’s masks are made of papier-mâché. This practice seems new, from the 1990s, since a group of performers residing in Mantang and Kijang split into two groups (later became Young Magical Troupe and Inheritance Mak Yong Troupe) and divided the ownership over wooden masks and musical instruments. The wooden masks have been kept by Pak Satar’s brother and are not used. Since the two groups are out of wooden masks, they started creating papier-mâché masks, which became a new tradition.

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- AV2 *Raja Johan Syah Nyaya* (The Unjust King Syah Johan) by Sanggar Mak Yong Warisan (Inheritance Mak Yong Troupe) at Bintan’s Theatre Festival, 27 August 2017. <<https://youtu.be/q1JcgvwHNg4>>
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- AV6 *Raja Megat Muda* (The Young Prince Megat Muda) by the group from SMP Negeri 23 (secondary school), Mantang, at Pementasan GSMS (Festival of Artists in School Movement), Bintan, 14 December 2017. <<https://youtu.be/CPSxsRwupkg> >
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AR4 *The Old Hunter Perambun* [4 October 2017]

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