

## Jikey: A Sociological Analysis of a Malay Traditional Theatre of Malaysia

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### ABSTRAK

*Kertas ini memberikan suatu tafsiran sosiologikal mengenai jikey, iaitu suatu bentuk seni persembahan Melayu tradisional yang cukup popular beberapa ketika dahulu di pulau Langkawi, Kedah. Hujjah utama kertas ini ialah bahawa sebagai suatu seni persembahan tradisional yang dilahirkan serta didukung sepenuhnya oleh "tradisi kecil", jikey menyerlahkan citra dan estetika persembahan masyarakat tani dan nelayan. Dari satu segi jikey memperlihatkan suatu pancaran citra dan estetika kolektif tradisi kecil yang terus dipersembahkan tanpa banyak variasi oleh beberapa kumpulan jikey yang terdapat di pulau tersebut. Dan dari segi yang lain ia memperlihatkan suatu reaksi serta tafsiran masyarakat tani dan nelayan di Langkawi mengenai ciri-ciri lucu yang dibawa masuk oleh ekonomi pasaran dalam kehidupan sosial mereka. Pendeknya, jikey merupakan suatu bentuk seni persembahan tradisional yang melahirkan suatu koleksi penanda (codes) yang tidak terdapat dalam seni persembahan tradisional Melayu lainnya, dan segala penanda ini terserlah hasil dari reaksi serta reaksi tradisi kecil itu terhadap aspek sosial yang dibawa oleh ekonomi pasaran.*

### ABSTRACT

*This article provides a sociological interpretation of a traditional performing art, jikey, which was at one time well known in Pulau Langkawi, Kedah. As a traditional art which characterises the culture of the little tradition, jikey manifests the creativity of the rural dwellers, peasants and fishermen. From another viewpoint, jikey represents reaction and interpretation by the peasants on the phenomenon of the intrusion of modern market economy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare once said that the world is a stage where men act many roles. As a sociologist I see that the stage is the world, specially created based on the illusions and visions of the dramatist, the theatre director and the actors. This illusion and vision, this creation, is presented to an audience whose life is coloured by a sociocultural system that has long been

formed. The world that is formed on the stage of theatre is understandably different from the real world outside of the created stage world. The world on stage is created to exemplify certain significant aspects of life such that when these aspects are merged together they reveal a theme and a message that may not be so easily exemplified or understood in the real, ordinary life.

Sociologists seldom study theatre to understand the webbed and myriad of real sociological life for they are more likely to focus their attentions on the real world. After all the real world is surely the best source where by to study and understand the life of a particular society, whereas the created world serves but to highlight only an aspect of that real world. Nevertheless, for me, the world that is created on stage is not achieved through a social vacuum or an empty, meaningless imagination. This is especially so in the field of traditional theatre.

#### THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Traditional theatre is not a product of a few individuals. It is almost collectively created through a constant exchange of consciousness and symbolism which is collectively significant to all, within a real, vivid socio-cultural context. Based on this premise, I am of the opinion that this socio-cultural context becomes the signifier for the birth and existence of traditional theatre, Theatre itself then becomes the signified.

Still within this socio-cultural context, not all that is encompassed within society have that internal strength to emerge as the signifiers. Traditional theatre scholars have identified that the belief system and the "great tradition" (palace and State) are the two big forces in society which have really and truly emerged as the signifiers. A particular belief system which gives significance to the necessity of producing a theatre, to act, to sing and to chant also gives significance to space, arena or stage; it also determines time and the moment when the performance must be produced. The theatre/show/performance also becomes an attractive power/force to pull the audience to come and see the theatre presentation. As such the belief system has given birth to traditional ritual dramas which centre around rites de passage, harvest rituals, worshipping the shore rituals and rain-dance rituals. These forms of rites and rituals are usually conducted by shaman or magicians. In Peninsular Malaysia such forms of traditional ritual dramas are best seen in the forms of *Main Puteri*, *Mek Mulung*, and *Saba*. These are all curing rituals and they best exemplify the strong relationship between traditional theatre and the belief system.

In addition to the belief system, traditional theatre also emerges and develops as a result of an exemplification of the cultures of the "great

tradition" which are centred in palaces or centres of bureaucracy and economy at the supravillage level. The great tradition, because it is the centre of power, the meeting point in the arena of commerce, trade and maritime activities, further compounded by the fact it is also the centre, the focus of economy and marketing for the whole district or state, thus also understandably becomes the centre for arts, cultural and theatre activities.

Some forms of traditional theatre are not related with rites and belief of a particular society. Rather these forms of traditional theatre exist as a result of artistic cultural endeavors done to perpetuate certain messages to the audience and also to gain fame and fortune. Examples of such traditional theatre include the *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Bangsawan*, and *Jikey*.

#### A THEATRE OF THE MALAY LITTLE TRADITION

*Jikey*, let me re-emphasize, as a traditional Malay theatre form did not emerge and develop because of the believe system of a particular Malay society, neither did *jikey* emerge from the great tradition, like the *Bangsawan*, to be produced as a commercial enterprise throughout the country. Rather, *jikey* emerged from the "little tradition", developed by and for a community of Malay farmers on an island, Langkawi, in the Northern state of Malaysia.

Langkawi, with a population of 35,000 (90% of whom are Malays) has never been a centre of traditional theatres as great as that of Kelantan with its shadow play, *Mak Yong* and *Menora*, for instance. Neither has Langkawi been the centre for the *Bangsawan*, also known as the Malay opera, which was for its age and time a commercial theatre par excellence with its centre in Penang, which is fairly near to Langkawi. Langkawi in fact is known only for its *Mahsuri* legend. In fact, the existence of *jikey* in Langkawi remains unknown outside of the Langkawi community. It was only in the early 1970's that *jikey* came to the knowledge of researchers. The first reasearch was done in 1977 by a team from the National University of Malaysia comprising Solehah Ishak, Harun Mat Piah, Azhar Simin, Ismail Hamid and Ramli Isin, all lecturers from the Malay Studies Department. Their research was followed by a team from the Sains University of Penang in 1980. In 1989, another group from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka also conducted a research on *jikey* in Langkawi. Although they have taped the production, to date there is no written documentation on it.

It must be admitted that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the date when *jikey* first started in Langkawi. But its existence cannot be earlier than the age, which saw the coming together of the Malays, Indians and Chinese on that island. This is so for, as a Malay traditional

theatre form, it amalgamates an image and characteristic which is visually plural in nature, something which is alien to other Malay traditional theatre forms.

The performance of *jikey* is divided into two parts: first the opening, and second the main story. The first unique aspect of this traditional Malay theatre form is its opening which is known as the *Makit Keling* (Indian Market).

The *Makit Keling* shows a scene where an Indian trader by the name of Harnamare comes on stage to speak, dance and sing. His performance is accompanied by loud music and also singing from the orchestra. When the Indian Harnamare leaves the stage, another character, the King (or Village Head in some productions) appear accompanied by a jester. In a joking manner they talk about the presence of the Indian in Langkawi. Both of them then go to the river's mouth to see the Indian. There they are told that the Indian wants to buy the local domestic animals like the cows and the goats etc. The King orders the jester, Awang (a Malay), to go and call Pek Seng, a Chinese who has lived for a long time in Langkawi. He is the local petty trader. After Harnamare has acquired the animals, he sets sail with his wife, Minachi, to India. Harnamare also takes along Awang and Pek Seng to work on board his ship.

*Jikey* activists consider the Indian character to be the supremely important personage in the *jikey* performance. It must be acted by a talented and really good actor for the Indian character is synonymous with *jikey*. Although this opening scene constitutes only ten percent of the total production time, this scene is what gives *jikey* its unique identity. In fact the appearance of the Indian is considered as the official opening of *jikey*. The main story which follows this *Makit Keling* does not contain anymore multi-racial characters.

Why is the presence of the non-Malay character so significant in a *jikey* performance? Why an Indian and not a merchant from Arabia or a white man or a Buddhist monk from Thailand? This I feel is a sociological question whose answer can only be deduced. A definite answer may well be impossible to find. The next question I want to pose is why is it that it was Pek Seng, the Chinese, who was asked to collaborate with the Indian, the Malay jester and the Malay King or Village Head? Why not a Malay peasant who was involved with dairy farming?

At this juncture it is obvious that the presence of the Indian trader and the Chinese petty trader has special significance. Based on the fact that *jikey* is a created endeavour done by Malay peasant in Langkawi, the importance and presence of the Indian and the Chinese must be seen from the perspective of their little tradition. I believe the presence of the Indian merchant is considered extremely significant and important by Malay peasants in the early part of the 20th century. This is so for the Indian has come to trade, to buy, and not to rob (perhaps, a normal

practise of the great Malay tradition in the pre-colonial era) the local dairy product. The element of trading, of buying, and not of robbing endows it with an economic perspective and a source of income and cash to their economic endeavours. This in turn would help increase their standard of living.

Prior to this their agricultural and rearing activities do not have a clear monetary value for their economic life is bounded by the culture of having just enough to survive in the pre-market economy. Moreover, as peasants, they might not have a clear theory about the transformations which they will have to go through when market economy begins to subsume their peasant economy. Then it is the presence of a foreign trader who wants to buy their domestic animals and the receiving of money or cash as a result of that sale, gives these Malay peasants a completely new experience, one that is very significant in their later economic life. It can be clearly stated that the presence of the Indian merchant becomes a powerful and significant symbol to this Malay peasant's little tradition. Hence they feel strangely elevated and it has a positive effect on their lives such that they continue to perpetuate this memory in their art form. What happens to their economic life as a result of the encroachment of this market economy, although it did not continue to profit and benefit them always, nevertheless does not affect their appreciation of the new experience.

In my opinion, the presence of the Indian merchant and how well received he was by the farmers of Langkawi has its parallel with the inhabitants of Melanesia islands and their reception towards the cargo brought by the Western traders to them. This cargo was considered by the Melanesians to be a gift from god. But I am quiet reluctant to connect this Cargo Cult theory with the coming and presence of the Indian traders for this theory is related to a particular doctrine in the belief system of the Melanesian people who are convinced that there will come a time (in a Millennium) that a cargo (riches) will be brought by foreigners as a reward for their belief and devotion in abiding to Christianity. In Langkawi, the presence of the Indian merchant is not associated with any religious belief. He does not bring any cargo with him either. In fact he takes away a "cargo" of domestic animals. What he brings is cash, hence wealth too. The similarity is there, minus the religious association. The Melanesian people's interest and welcome of the cargo is similar to how the Langkawi farmers welcome the Indian merchant. This they perpetuate in their *jikey* performance for the Indian, although he does not bring a cargo, bring in fact something better: a new meaning and value to their economic life which in their opinion, promises a more positive and fruitful future economic and market endeavour.

Both the King or the Village Head and the jester's positive and welcoming attitude towards the Indian merchant can be regarded as the

highest form of acknowledgement. The Indian merchant did not go and see the farmers directly, rather he was welcomed by the King or the Village Head 'on behalf' of the farmers. The jester could not have represented the farmers for he does not have a high status. The King/Village Head does not only have high status but also power to give instructions that all aid be rendered to help the Indian merchant acquire his goods. The meeting of the King/Village Head and the Indian merchant is an important and significant event. This is elaborately staged in a *jikey* show.

In addition to the above, it must be emphasized that the Indian merchant is not regarded as an arrogant foreigner who only deals with the King/Village Head. Although he is well respected, the Indian merchant is a humble man and although he is rich he is not devoid of having personal problems.

His wife, Minachi, is not on good terms with him. She is staying at a 'rest house' and is quite reluctant to follow him back to India. Thus it is that the Indian merchant asked the Malay jester and Pek Seng to go and persuade his wife to come to the river mouth so that they can set sail to India. In fact, the Indian merchant is shown to be a very jealous man; he is really angry when the jester and Pek Seng try to "seduce" his discontented wife. Anyway, towards the end, the Indian merchant triumphed for not only are his personal problems overcome, he also has acquired new wealth and two new workers. Together they dance and sing to prove that amongst them there does not exist a social distance. In fact, this episode exemplifies the fact that the Indian character is a humble, well-liked person.

The fact that the Indian merchant requests for permission from the King/Village Head to take the Malay jester and Chinese petty trader to work for him also serves to illustrate how keen the local inhabitants are towards this new form of employment practice which before the coming of the Indian merchant never happened. In traditional Malay society, it must be pointed out, that the economic life of the farmers are linked to their being peasants, namely labouring of self-employment, or they are mere messenger boys or errand goers for some big, high status man. Their services are not paid in monetary terms although a few of them might be given accommodation, clothing or food. Some of these people are in fact bonded slaves. Paid employment is therefore regarded as a new form of economic practice better than their old jobs of being just errand boys or slaves. In fact, it is even better than being a mere petty trader (Pek Seng's occupation). The event of nominating the jester and the petty trader to be employed in the services of the Indian merchant; has certain significance for the people of Langkawi. Hence they incorporate this in their *jikey* art form.

The Indian character, his wife Minachi, the Malay King/Village Head, the Malay jester and the Chinese Pek Seng in a *jikey* performance

reveal the presence of multi-racial characters, as said earlier on, unique only to *jikey* and not found in other Malay traditional theatre. This also serves to illustrate a liberal social attitude for the Langkawi society at the time of the development of *jikey* are composed of a majority of Malay population together with Thai and Chinese inhabitants. This society, at that time, was not confronted with a racial problem which now seems to be Malaysia's paramount challenge. The presence of these multi-racial characters, with the exception of the Thais, exist in a *jikey* production without any pre-conceived ethnic bias. Thai character is not present in a *jikey* performance, for at that time, Malay Muslims and Buddhist Thais enjoyed a close relationship further bonded by the use of the Thai language and the local Malay dialect as the *lingua franca* of the region. In fact most *jikey* actors are conversant in the Thai language. However, in Kedah, especially in Kuala Nerang, there exists a Thai *jikey* group. The name is a misnomer for this Thai *jikey* is in fact done by Malays who speak and sing in the Thai language. In the *jikey* production in Langkawi three languages are used, namely Malay, 'Indian' and Thai. Although a Thai character is not physically present, the Thai language is there to exemplify yet another multi-racial aspect of *jikey*.

Another aspect that must be analyzed is the choice and appearance of characters. In a modern theatre production characters are created by a single individual: the dramatist him/herself. The choice of characters are determined by the playwright based on a particular story. In a *jikey* performance this opening episode of the "Makit Keling" does not exhibit any changes in the number of characters, their order of appearance or the issues involved. Each *jikey* performance although produced by different groups explicates the same characters, the same motives, the same order of appearance and the same ending. The only thing that differentiates one *jikey* production from the next is the main story which follows this opening episode.

#### CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that this opening episode of *jikey* exemplifies a collective endeavour which serves to reveal a collective significance and consciousness – the collective signifiers. For so long as the Indian character is important and form a crucial, unique and integral part of a *jikey* show, this Malay traditional theatre form will continue to exist as a collective representation of what is important and significant to them. The significance and importance of the Indian character is again dependent on whether the Malay peasants continue to have a positive image of the market economy which was brought to change their economic life centered on farming activities.

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