

# **A STUDY ON STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF MAK YONG COSTUME IN MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through times, the skills of arts in human life are developing. Together with fast growing of the technologies, other aspects that cover the norms, cultures and lifestyle are developed as well. In the arts field, it has been a must to create certain techniques and creativity to develop together, e.g. the development of ideas and styles that changed from old to new.

Mak Yong, as one of the local Malay traditional arts is often being in the centre of attentions, where the activities of cultural encouragements towards its performance are also developed, where originally it was well known only in Kelantan. Beyond times until today, it became a globally famous subject of art that it is recognized by the UNESCO as the “World’s Intangible Heritage of Humanity”, which indirectly made the arts from Kelantan an important cultural arts for the whole Malaysian society. As Mak Yong has developed in its history, so did the structure of performance and other elements in the classical arts, including the costumes used. It is well known by the public of the costumes, but how far the functions and the importance of the costumes to Mak Yong was never an important matter to the public, even to the Mak Yong activists themselves. The old generations of Mak Yong and the researcher understand the previous forms of the costumes, but the knowledge did not reached the generation of today or the public. What became clear to the eyes of the public are the costumes that we already have now.

Through the critical views that evaluated the costumes of Mak Yong from the literature sources, plus the critical analysis that went through the phases of “description-analysis-interpretation-evaluation”, including the views from the experts. It is found that actually, the costumes of Mak Yong have developed and have the interesting changes of styles, not only from the outlook, but the reflections the costumes have towards the entire aspects of civilized human life that related to the factors of political and administrative, social, economy, culture and religion. Besides that, the costumes in Mak Yong need to be emphasized from the aspect of theatrical design, along with its importance towards the values of traditional cultures. These are the factors that qualified Mak Yong as the famed classical theatre in humanity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Everything in this world is developed, transformed, restored and historically showing their progress from time to time. In the domain of traditional performing arts in Malaysia, the structure and supportive elements of performance have always been revived with new dimensions and sometimes ornaments with new artistic techniques and methods. The processes based on human intellectual development, creativity and technologies in a way to give a contribution to a particular field. These factors of development according to the requirement that ruled by the government to stimulates the commercialization in the art tradition since the changes of the National Cultural Policy from national cultural development to cultural tourism development in 1987. The result is to promote Malaysian art and culture in the international arena and it is also purposed to attract Malaysians especially young generations (Mohd Ghazali Abdullah, 2001 and Mohamad Daud Muhammad, 2001).

Mak Yong is the subject of this study, is an ancient traditional theatre that believed to be originated from Pattani 400 years ago. It is in the form of dance theatre that incorporates elements of ritual, stylized dance and acting; vocal and instrumental music, story, song; formal as well as improvised spoken text that performs principally in the state of Kelantan. (Ghulam Sarwar, 1976 & 2002). Mak Yong has various types of arts and cultural elements that are interesting to be discovered. Previous studies by Sheppard (1983), Malm (1963) and Ghulam Sarwar (1976) contributed to the understanding of the genre and brief history of Mak Yong. Although they have not discussed directly in detail about the costume in Mak Yong but through the detailed study on Mak Yong performance structure such as by Ghulam Sarwar, a number of refinements on Mak Yong had been made including the supportive elements of the genre such as costume, make up and staging. The refinement and reconstruction of Mak Yong finally contributed a historical development of Mak Yong along with the particular periods, given the fact that Mak Yong itself has declined considerably during the past century. It has undergone major transformations in style and performance structure as in its costumes and other supportive elements (National Arts and Cultural Division (JKKN), 2005). The main goal of this research is to study the development and stylistic change of Mak Yong costume in Malaysia in terms of form and content, and ultimately suggesting a classification of styles of Mak Yong costume from 1920's to 2000.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Different methods were employed to achieve the objectives of the research. For the first objective, to trace the history of Mak Yong costume where the researcher has referred to the review of related literature that focus on Mak Yong, history of Mak Yong, Mak Yong costume, history of costume, costume in theatre, style, form and content in visual art. For the second objective, to analyze the form and content of Mak Yong costume in Malaysia - the researcher has employed Feldman (1970) art critique process - Description, Analysis, Interpretation and Evaluation in the grounded theory of the analysis. Additionally, in order to gather information on content in Mak Yong costume, the researcher has conducted several interview sessions with Mak Yong activists and referred to the literature review to support the interpretation and evaluation process of costume analysis. To achieve the third objective - the classification of style in Mak Yong costume - the researcher has conducted a structured interview sessions with experts in Mak Yong, costume design and cultural field.

## **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

Regarding the history and development of Mak Yong costume, the earliest detail description of Mak Yong costume could be traced from the lyric of *menghadap rebab* song, which is the prominent song in Mak Yong performance for theatre opening. The description was explaining about Pak Yong or King, a main leading of the play are ready in action (Ghulam Sarwar 1976). The costume was in a complete regalia of office to displays the character as a King who rules the government or a country. According to Ghulam sarwar (1976), at the beginning, there were no distinctive costume for characters except for Pak Yong, others were that just wearing their own daily attire where the style

changed regularly. Since 1930 until 30 years onwards later, the elements and performance structure in Mak Yong including the costume did not change so much (Cuisener 1936 and Ghulam Sarwar, 1976). The Costume as explained by Sheppard (1983) was the simplest form at the beginning and some of costume was adapting Patani's royal attire for wedding. The changes of costume style were much influenced by administration structure of Mak Yong troupe. An improvement in Mak Yong costume occurred obviously during the period of Kampong Temenggong in 1923 to 1935. Mak Yong began experiencing various innovations and refinements that led to the transformation from common folk art played in rural areas to a more proper form in palace, hence the costume was refined to be more complete especially the headgear that started to be designed for characters. Moreover, during the establishment of Seri Temenggong troupe, lead by Allahyarhamah Khatijah Awang in 1970, the form and style of Mak Yong was modernised, then the costume was also transform into the modern look which shows the influence of western dressing such the modern corset or tank top. In its entirety, the costume that used showed the influence and adaptation from traditional dressing style of Malay and Patani then modernised time to time.

According to analysis of costume by period, the style in Mak Yong costume was gradually developed from one style to another and sometime the changes happened drastically. It was evolved hand in hand with creativity and influenced by external factors on the costume cutting, decorative elements and accessories. Every development of style in Mak Yong's costumes and form that designed were represent symbols and value that related to political, economical, social and cultural factors and meets the specifications of stage costume. At the beginning, the changes of costume style was so much refer to daily clothes, then developed by showing the influence of current fashion style. Since 1990, the costume in Mak Yong improved with distinctive design in much authentic form to demonstrate the genre as a Malay traditional dance theatre. The costume was continue revived until to the latest style that obviously shows the features of Malay traditional costume especially Cik Siti Wan Kembang's costume (Norwani Nawawi, 2003 and Zubaidah Sual, 2008). The costume was assumed as a creative work and interpretation of current costume designer in order to create the fresh look of classical Mak Yong costume that adapted in contemporary setting.

Furthermore, the costume was also influenced by the style that derived from other types of Malay traditional dance or according the favourite style in current performance (Tharuwat, 2009). Such example, the current style of Mak Yong costume that used since early 2000 until present time was concerning the requirement from the stake holder; the ministry. All costume for Mak Yong characters must be created to be a beautiful and attractive costume that looked vast on stage. The social factor on the status of the actor or dancer was also influence the style of Mak Yong costume, which is assumed must to be matched with the actor's status who play the character and ignoring the status of character that played accordingly. All characters including the supportive role such palace attendant were worn the highly decorated costume. The phenomenon finally gives the negative implication to the performance in terms of stage costume characterisation. The hierarchy between the characters were neglected, hence the played character in Mak Yong could not be fully understood by audience according to the costume that worn by the actor fail to display or explain the character's status (Zubaidah Sual and Najib Nor, 2009).

The colour and fabric on Mak Yong costume that worn today was enhanced than the older periods according to the good sources of material supplies in current market. The factors was also due to the development of economic situation of Mak Yong troupe that become more stable due to availability of sponsorship by the government or Mak Yong patron (Tharuwat and Zubaidah Sual, 2009). However sometime, the fabric choice for costume was also inappropriate with the character status and the visual effect on stage. The application of synthetic fabrics such as polyester, shining fabric etc. in some costumes made the costumes less glowing on stage because the fabric and synthetic fibres are not good in absorbing lights. This material will bounce back the lights and resulting in boring costumes effects, and visually, the colour freshness and excitements are lost. Hence, almost entirely, the costumes are not succeeded to meet the characterizations of stage costume. The artificial developments in costumes and visual elements of Mak Yong that are applied in the Mak Yong contemporary troupe will give negative effects to the audience. This can be compared to the

performance and costumes of Mak Yong that is performed in the rural areas of Kelantan, in obnoxious barn, which is in scarcity, but the effects of the performance towards the audience are deeper because of the honesty carried by the actors and dancer (Najib Nor, 2009). Costume for almost all characters was too beautiful until it could shift audience attention to the costume as main object to be discussed in a performance. Realistically, the costume should not be the main attraction but only as a supportive element in the performance. All in all, the stylistic development of Mak Yong Mak Yong costume still carry a positive development in term of improvement in creativity, advancement of technology and artistic techniques. It was finally resulted a stand-out Malay traditional costume and also simplified costume that easy to be worn by concerning the costume practicality and time factor that should be aware in a theatre performance. Beyond times, the development in Mak Yong costume also has shown improvement in terms of economic achievement, skill in costume design and other matters that relate with the costume made including the development of decoration element and textile. As a result, the style of Mak Yong costume could be classified according to periods from 1920's to 2000 onwards:

Classification of style of Mak Yong costume		
Period	Style	Description
1920's to 1930's	Simple style (the beginning)	Used only cloth that simply wrapped around the bodice, inspired by the daily wears of Kelantan Malay society around the early of 20 <sup>th</sup> century. Only costume for Pak Yong that was decorated in unique style, completed with headdress and shirts.
1940's and 1950's	Simple costume style in traditional Malay attire	Royal character: complete royal attire with decorated headdress that some style maintain the characterizations in the period of Kampong Temenggong. Supportive character: the costume were adapted from the Mak Yong dancers' everyday wears.
1960's	Traditional Malay attire style	Maintain the form of previous style but began to involve the application of decorative elements to enhance the costumes. The <i>dayang</i> and <i>peran</i> 's costume are arranged in uniform.
1970's to early 1980's	Modern style that involve the current fashion influences	Traditional form of costume revived and influenced from the current fashion style that refer to the Western style, where the tight and body-exposing elements were mixed-up and has brought contemporary looked. Costumes for Mak Yong the princess and Dayang transformed totally and back to use the sarong tied to the bosom style like in the era of Kampong Temenggong, only in modern form - bustier or corset.
Late 1980's	Enrichment of enhancement and traditional element in the style of modern cutting	The characterization of traditional elements was enriched again by using kebaya. However, the influenced of modern cutting has been applied on the costumes such as modern kebaya and modern blouse with cap sleeves that were adapted from the kebaya. Costume for all characters enhanced with decorative elements. Dayang began to wear La, the necklace that was supposed to put on royal characters only. However, the differences between Dayang and princess could be seen through the different styles and structures of costumes of both characters.
1990's	Decent style of traditional costume in modern cutting	The same concepts from around late 1980s were maintained. The costume looked decent by the use of modern <i>kebaya</i> and <i>mini kurung</i> in loose fit cuttings. The decorative element were similar to the ones in the late 1980s, however all characters in Mak Yong including Peran and Dayang were enhanced, beautifully and elaborately accessorised.
2000 onwards	Classical style in contemporary setting.	Major change on almost every costume for the characters, the costumes for Pak Yong, Mak Yong and Dayang were elaborately enhanced, using luxurious fabric such as full songket, accessories and decorative elements, making all costumes look famed and luxurious. The structure of costumes for Mak Yong and Dayang are totally changed and cultivated with the similar styles without any differences, accessories such as gilded coronet, La or necklace put on Dayang are almost 100% similar to what the princess wear.

Table 1: Classification of style in Mak Yong costume in Malaysia

## CONCLUSION

The costumes that have been used in Mak Yong display the traditional element and content of Malay traditional costume that suit with the form of genre as Malay traditional dance theatre. However the condition is, Mak Yong's costume will always be the costumes for performing arts, which is dynamic, where the main function is as supportive elements to the performances. The costumes are not supposed to be the main attraction or the subject matter to be discussed. Nevertheless, the designs in Mak Yong costumes still have shown the changing of styles that are interesting to be focused. The changes that took place are not totally by development, but happened in various forms, changed directly, drastically or redundantly. The changes in the way of wearing, material used, colours and

decorations showed the development of creativity through the ever changing of costumes' forms, including the applications of elements and principle of design on the costumes. The development of the forms of costumes and the application of fabrics on the costumes has also shown the development of materials used that is related to the advancement of the technology. The changes in the costumes' form have also brought changes to the content of the costumes that related to the performing arts and other aspects of human lives. These several factors have made the costumes in Mak Yong is extremely important. Really, is not only as a supportive element in the performance but also important in the human civilization which also related to the elements of politics, economy, sociology, culture and religion.

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