

The Evolution of *Mak Yong* Traditional Malay Theatre in Istana Budaya

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Abstract

Mak Yong is a traditional Malay theatre form that originated in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia. It encompasses numerous elements such as dancing, singing, music, improvisational acting, dialogues, storytelling, and rituals. This article examines the efforts made by Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture), the Malaysian National Theatre in Kuala Lumpur to sustain the traditional art form through several productions spanning from 2003 to 2019. The aim of this research is to examine the expansion of *Mak Yong* performances presented by Istana Budaya. It is a government organisation that responsible in sustaining the traditional Malay theatre in Malaysia. This study employed a qualitative methodology, historical research and content analysis including conducting interviews with participants and examining each of the *Mak Yong* performances in Istana Budaya. The analysis discovered that *Mak Yong* performances in Istana Budaya evolves from its convention as it the staging shifted from the rural set up to the modern staging. Secondly, Istana Budaya introduced a male actor to play the role of *Pak Yong*. The role of *Pak Yong* the male king has been played by female actors since 1923. Thirdly, it is discovered that Istana Budaya produced numbers of *Mak Yong* amateur performers in Kuala Lumpur. The tradition changed from professional Kelantanese *Mak Yong* performers, which learnt throughout their lifetime in Kelantan, to the performers who learned *Mak Yong* at the rehearsal sessions, and it is currently learned by non-Kelantanese. It argues that the Istana Budaya's *Mak Yong* productions have evolve *Mak Yong* performances from their conventional in Kelantan to the modern stage and urban audience. This research emphasizes that Istana Budaya is making a significant and meaningful contribution to the preservation and continuation of the *Mak Yong* tradition.

Keywords: *Mak Yong*, traditional Malay theatre, Istana Budaya, performing arts, Malay culture.

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Introduction

Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture) the Malaysian National Theatre has emerged as the primary institution in Kuala Lumpur dedicated to the preservation of *Mak Yong*. *Mak Yong* is a traditional Malay dance theatre encompasses several elements such as dance, singing, music, improvisational acting, and rituals. The Istana Budaya is recognised as one of the world's top ten most advanced theatres. It is the first theatre in Asia to be equipped with leading-edge stage equipment (Foley & Sabzali Khan, 2012). The venue consists of two distinct performance areas, namely *Panggung Sari* and *Lambang Sari*. *Panggung Sari* features a stage with a proscenium arch design that can accommodate up to 1413 audience members, while *Lambang Sari* has a thrust stage that can seat 281 spectators. Istana Budaya serves as a venue for both local and

international performing arts. As the National Theatre, its role extends beyond being a venue for performances. Istana Budaya is also responsible for preserving and promoting Malaysian traditional forms of art, such as *Mak Yong*. In 2005, UNESCO designated *Mak Yong* as a 'cultural masterpiece' as part of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Award.

Mak Yong performances in Kelantan as serving two distinct functions: firstly, as a non-ritual kind of theatre meant for entertainment purposes, and secondly, as a ritualistic form of theatre associated with healing, typically conducted with the involvement of shamans (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 1976). However, in the twenty-first century, *Mak Yong* in Kuala Lumpur no longer serves just as a form of entertainment. Surviving amidst other contemporary performances might be challenging. The current performance of *Mak Yong* serves as a means of cultural preservation. This paper argues that the *Mak Yong* performances produced by Istana Budaya can be classified as urban commercial theatre. Between 2003 and 2019, Istana Budaya produced a total of eight *Mak Yong* productions: *Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), *Endeng Tejeli* (2008), *Raja Besar Senyanya* (2009), *Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011), *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013), and *Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019). The aim of this research is to analyse the development of *Mak Yong* performances produced by Istana Budaya, a crucial government organisation in the promotion of traditional Malay theatre in Malaysia.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of Istana Budaya plays as a government entity in promoting the preservation of *Mak Yong*, a traditional Malay theatre in Malaysia?
2. How are *Mak Yong* performances presented by Istana Budaya contribute to the evolution of traditional Malay theatre?
3. What is the progress of *Mak Yong* at Istana Budaya in advancing the future of *Mak Yong* in Malaysia, particularly in Kuala Lumpur?

Literature Review

The Istana Budaya was launched in the year 2000. The first *Mak Yong* production at Istana Budaya took place in 2003, featuring *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati*. It was directed by Norzizi Zulkifli under the mentorship of Fatimah Abdullah, a renowned *Mak Yong* prima donna, and Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, esteemed academic advisors. The production took place from 22nd – 26th August 2003. Given that the space was newly established and boasted of being of the highest quality, the task of showcasing this traditional art form in a grand theatre was seen as a challenge. Historically, *Mak Yong* performances were typically held in an outdoor setting, with the audience situated in an open space surrounding the stage. The performance area, referred to as *bangsal*, was a temporary building built using bamboo, including a roof made of thatched palm leaves, and had a height of around 1.5 metres (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 2004). Rahimidin Zahari and Sutung Umar (2011) clarify that *Mak Yong* is a highly minimalist performance that does not necessitate backgrounds, scenery, curtains, wings, or backstage space. In *Mak Yong*,

most of the scene transitions are facilitated by the dialogues spoken by the characters. The dialogues serve to elucidate the setting of the scenes, the ambiance, and to describe the actions performed by the characters. Therefore, when *Mak Yong* was chosen to be showcased on the Istana Budaya stage, the task of maintaining the traditional aspects while also accommodating the advanced stage technology arose.

The Istana Budaya performance of *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* was performed on the proscenium stage, and the set design was in line with the contemporary style commonly seen in Western theatre. In contrast to typical *Mak Yong* performances, this production incorporated theatrical scene changes, utilising various sets and employing lifts, wagons, fly bars, and other special effects to their fullest extent. It is necessary to integrate *Mak Yong* with modern technologies to ensure its relevance for contemporary audiences (Foley & Sabzali Khan, 2012). For *Mak Yong* to persist in the twenty-first century, it is imperative to make appropriate adjustments and modifications. “For *Mak Yong* to continue into the twenty-first century, adaptation is necessary. Cultural heritage that remains too “true” to the past makes for an endangered form” (Foley & Sabzali Khan, 2012, p. 420). Foley and Sabzali Khan continue to suggest that the incorporation of cutting-edge technologies is crucial in bridging the gap between the traditional form of *Mak Yong* and the contemporary era, as exemplified on the Istana Budaya stage.

Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa was presented in Istana Budaya’s *Raja Tangkai Hati* three years after the first production in 2003. In this production, the main differences from *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* were that the performance space was a thrust and the setting was on a *bangsas* and resembled a village. Historically, *Mak Yong* was performed by a female actor; however, here the actor was male. In 2002, Rosnan Rahman, the actor who played in this production, watched a performance by Pak Su Mat playing *Pak Yong* in *Mak Yong*, which sparked his intention to play *Pak Yong* like his grandmother, who had been a *Mak Yong* performer in Kedah. Having a male play this role was new and gained criticism from several people, including Eliza Zainuddin (2012), a Malaysian scholar, who questioned the purpose of changing to a male actor because, in her opinion, it was awkward for the audiences. The reason for this is that in *Mak Yong*, the female actors were traditionally cast to portray the character of *Pak Yong*, the male king. There is a scarcity of male performers that have portrayed the character of *Pak Yong* in Malaysia. Hence, the alteration implemented by the production of *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* in 2006 was rather unusual. A Malaysian playwright, Dinsman (2006), considers *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* to have to be modernised because of the use of lighting, screen projectors, costume changes, and the epilogue scene, all of which reminded the audience that this was a contemporary interpretation of the traditional form.

Mak Yong Endeng Tejeli (2008) was staged at *Lambang Sari* on January 25th–26th, 2008. The production was directed by Fatimah Abdullah and featured Rosnan Rahman and the dancers from Istana Budaya. *Mak Yong Endeng Tejeli* was the second *Mak Yong* production that was performed at *Lambang Sari*. The performance of *Mak Yong Raja Besar Senyanya* took place from January 9th–11th, 2009, at the *Lambang Sari* stage. It was directed by Fatimah Abdullah, who skilfully combined the traditional *Mak Yong* language with modern language. This fusion, along with the incorporation of modern elements into the classical story, successfully appealed to present-day audiences.

The performance of *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* was well received by the audiences throughout its run from January 22nd–24th 2010 at *Panggung Sari*. This production was intriguing because of the presence of two male kings; the title means the two kings that look alike. What is unique in this production is the use of two different genders of actors to play the role of the king, *Pak Yong*. One is portrayed by a male actor, and the other by a female actress. The actors are Rosnan Rahman and Juhara Ayob. During an interview with Juhara Ayob (Juhara Ayob, pers. comm.), who is the female actor who played the role of *Pak Yong*, the male king, she remarked that her role was far more demanding compared to the male actor's portrayal of the male *Pak Yong*, Rosnan Rahman, which required no alterations. However, given Juhara's situation, she consistently engaged in introspection and consciously reinforced the notion that she identified as a male being. Juhara is contemplating whether she should alter her vocal characteristics to sound masculine. How can one effectively collaborate with their acting partner when both are of different genders and portraying the same male king? (Juhara Ayob, pers. comm.). The play *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011), directed by Fatimah Abdullah, was originally played from June 17th–18th, 2011 in *Lambang Sari*. In contrast to *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), the staging of *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010) had little usage of the stage facilities.

In the performance of *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010) at *Panggung Sari*, the stage lifts were only utilised at the beginning of the play. Subsequently, the set remained static, with the fly bars being employed to alter the settings. *Mak Yong Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019) utilised a static stage without any movement using stage lifts, and the stage crew members were responsible for making set changes. The productions, *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2011) and *Mak Yong Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2013), remained in the *Mak Yong* tradition in the village, in which all the actors remained seated on the stage during the performances and participated in the action when needed.

Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang was directed by Fatimah Abdullah and performed at *Panggung Sari* from November 29th to December 2nd, 2013. This production was staged and had the highest cost, with a budget of roughly RM250,000.00 (Rosnan Rahman, pers. comm.). This production was opulent and aimed to visually present *Mak Yong* in a unique way compared to its traditional form. *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* incorporated modern elements into traditional theatre by utilising new technology, screen projections, and, for the first time in the history of *Mak Yong* plays in Malaysia, a flying scene (Azz al-Yahya, 2013). The flying scene featured two actors suspended in mid-air, six feet above the stage. The price for the flying scene was RM70,000. This *Mak Yong* production made history by selling tickets at a record-breaking price of RM253.00, hence increasing the value of traditional theatre (Ismail Yusof, 2013). Jumilah Tahir (2013) a critic, performer, and educator of *Mak Yong*, was captivated by the stage's aesthetic and regards this production as the finest presentation of *Mak Yong* on the modern stage. Azz al-Yahya (2013) asserts that *Kesaktian Raja Gondang* is a modern adaptation of the traditional *Mak Yong* performance, which incorporates visual enhancements using new technologies to appeal to younger viewers. Salina Tapha (2013) acknowledges that viewing *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* filled me with a sense of pride as a Malaysian who possesses the cultural treasure of *Mak Yong*, which is on par with the world's cultural legacy.

The theatrical performance of *Mak Yong Raja Besar Maha Gading* took place at the *Panggung Sari* theatre hall from October 11th – 13th 2019. The production was directed by Rosnan Rahman, with Fatimah Abdullah serving as the advisor and coach. This show differed from *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003) in that it utilised the stage methods of Istana Budaya to their fullest extent. In this production, the stage remains stationary on stage without the use of stage wagons or lifts. The central element on the stage was a substantial platform with multiple levels, enabling all the actors and the ensemble to remain on stage during the entire performance. Movable sets and flying bars are essential for indicating scene changes. The flying bars played a crucial role in establishing the visual appeal of the scenes as well as marking the specific locations. Ultimately, the performance had a mobile set that necessitated the stage crews manually pushing it in and out. The visual style of this show had resemblance to the previous *Mak Yong, Kesaktian Anak Gondang* (2013), but this time it incorporated LED projections to contemporize the visual aspect of *Mak Yong*. *Mak Yong Raja Besar Maha Gading* incorporated a 3D multimedia display that featured dynamic moving graphics. Despite the absence of any flying scenes, the budget was significantly increased to allow the utilisation of LEDs and pyrotechnics. The pyrotechnics were used to create magnificent and magical effects on stage. For instance, there was a scene when a character fell asleep and woke up transformed into a wealthy individual, which was achieved using pyrotechnics. Indeed, its cost of RM300,000 made it the most expensive *Mak Yong* production (Irwan Ismadi Shahrim, pers. comm.). This play also employs renowned celebrities as actors to enhance its appeal and draw a larger audience.

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative approach primarily historical research, to comprehend the historical dimensions of conventional *Mak Yong* performance including its staging and performers. It also requires examining entirely the *Mak Yong* productions in Istana Budaya. This research includes a content analysis of the performance videos. This research employs semi-structured interviews, with the performers, scholars, directors and the artistic director of *Mak Yong* productions Istana Budaya.

Relocating The *Mak Yong* Performance

The *Mak Yong* performances in Istana Budaya have undergone significant evolution, primarily because of changes in the performance's location. As mentioned earlier, this performance originated in the state of Kelantan and was performed by the public in an open-sided space for the local people in the villages. The performance took place in the centre of the space, where the actors were visible to the audience and on stage all the time when they were not performing. There was no area behind the stage. In the *Mak Yong* tradition, the term "actor" was not developed. Instead, *Mak Yong* practitioners in Malay referred to themselves as "pemain." *Mak Yong* is a term that directly translates to "the player." Thus, *Mak Yong* practitioners do not define themselves as actors or use the term "acting" in *Mak Yong*. Instead, they refer to themselves as

"main." *Mak Yong* refers to the act of “doing” *Mak Yong*, not “performing” *Mak Yong*, according to Western understanding. The practice of 'playing' *Mak Yong* differs from the Western notion since it is shaped by the discipline of performance, the artists themselves, and the staging.

Istana Budaya is equipped with two theatrical areas, namely *Panggung Sari* and *Lambang Sari*. *Panggung Sari* is a stage with a proscenium arch design, while *Lambang Sari* is a thrust stage. *Mak Yong* productions in Istana Budaya were performed in two distinct venues. The *Mak Yong* performances at *Lambang Sari* included *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), *Mak Yong Endeng Tejeli* (2008), *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013), and *Mak Yong Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019). In *Panggung Sari*, the following performances were performed: *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), *Mak Yong Raja Besar Senyanya* (2008), and *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011). The analysis of the eight shows reveals that the notion of *Mak Yong* performances in Istana Budaya may be categorised into two distinct approaches. Firstly, efforts were made to enhance the artistic characteristics of *Mak Yong* performances by incorporating innovative elements. The stage of *Lambang Sari* demands an extravagant visual display. Secondly, the aim was to preserve the traditional notion of *Mak Yong* in rural areas. *Mak Yong* performances in *Panggung Sari* showcase the traditional elements of *Mak Yong* as seen in the villages. Thus, one can infer that there were efforts made to preserve, revive, modify, and innovate *Mak Yong*, although in the urban stage.

Mohamed Ghouse Nasruddin (pers. comm.) contends that *Mak Yong* should remain to the principle of simplicity. He describes *Mak Yong* as a theatre of conceptualization of abstract ideas and asserts that the audience should envision the visuals on stage rather than relying on an extravagant setting. Nevertheless, *Mak Yong* performers in Kuala Lumpur faced the difficulty of adapting *Mak Yong* for a modern stage. Urban *Mak Yong* practitioners embarked on an experiment to explore ways to manifest the fantastical, magical, dramatic, and non-realistic elements of *Mak Yong* stories on the modern stage. In summary, the staging for all *Mak Yong* productions at Istana Budaya can be classified into two categories: those that prioritise elaborate staging with set designs, props, and technical facilities, and those that aim to preserve the simplicity of traditional *Mak Yong*. Big stages invariably result in grandiose performances, with a strong focus on extravagant visual presentation. Occasionally, it is these large-scale productions that generate a need for spacious venues. The production style of *Mak Yong* in Istana Budaya was influenced by the venue and formed by the space and facilities available.

The Rise of A Male *Pak Yong*

The character of *Pak Yong*, the prince or king, is the main role in *Mak Yong*. According to Rahimidin Zahari and Sutung Umar RS (2011), prior to 1920, men assumed this position. During the reign of Tengku Temenggung, or Long Abdul Ghaffar, the son of Sultan Muhammad II, the ruler of Kelantan, *Mak Yong*, was introduced to the royal court. Tengku Temenggung established Tengku Temenggung Village in 1923 in the compound of his palace, where a group of highly talented *Mak Yong* performers was presented. Over one hundred *Mak Yong* prima donnas were chosen to comprise a highly competent group of *Mak Yong* performers. An

important change that occurred during this period was the introduction of female actors to portray the character of *Pak Yong*. Therefore, since the existence of Tengku Temenggung Village, the role of *Pak Yong* has been played by female actors. The demise of Tengku Temenggung had a significant influence on *Mak Yong*. *Mak Yong* performers departed from the palace and went to their own villages. Nevertheless, women in the villages persisted in performing the role of *Pak Yong*. Multiple *Mak Yong* groups showcased their performances in various communities throughout Kelantan. Consequently, *Mak Yong* transformed into a predominantly female dance-theatre form, with male players being assigned supporting parts. Female actors portrayed the *Pak Yong* characters. Consequently, the decision of Istana Budaya to change to a male actor as *Pak Yong* in the 2006 performance *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* posed a challenge for the audience's acceptance. The decision is criticised by both theatre activists Dinsman (2006) and academic Eliza Zainuddin (2012). Rosnan Rahman, the actor, was influenced by the portrayal of Pak Su Mat, the male actor who played *Pak Yong* in the *Cahaya Bulan* troupe, during his performance in 2002. Pak Su Mat is one of the few male actors who are currently portraying the character of Pak Yong. This marked a significant breakthrough in the development of Istana Budaya's *Mak Yong* performances.

Through the eight productions, there has been a diverse range of choices about the gender of the actor playing the role of *Pak Yong*. In *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), female performers are still cast to portray the part of *Pak Yong*. In the production of *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), a significant event took place, as it introduced a unique element by featuring two *Pak Yong* characters of different genders, thus offering two distinct interpretations. This production features the male character *Pak Yong*, portrayed by Rosnan Rahman, and another female actor, Siti Nor Habsah Sheikh Ahmad, who also plays the role of *Pak Yong*. This production has dual portrayals of *Pak Yong*, with one male actor and one female actress. This technique is employed once more in the production *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), when two male characters, portrayed by Rosnan Rahman and Juhara Ayob (a female actor), play the roles of *Pak Yong*. In *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011), a distinct practice was employed by the director of *Mak Yong*, Fatimah Abdullah, where both *Pak Yong* roles were portrayed by male performers, namely Rosnan Rahman and Arja Lee. Reflecting on the practice of two *Pak Yong* with different genders, two *Pak Yong* with the same gender, and the introduction of a male *Pak Yong* in female dance theatre prompts contemplation. Are these the modifications that improve performance, or which one is more efficient? This could be considered a potential subject for future investigation. In Malaysia, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, the prominence of female *Pak Yong* has been notable since the 1970s, with the emergence of prima donna Khatijah Awang. *Pak Yong*, a male performer from Besut named Pak Su Kadir, incorporates an artificial breast into his outfit during his performances. It is remarkable that he, being a male actor portraying a male character, desires to be perceived as a female actor. Does the habit of casting female actors as *Pak Yong*, a masculine character, lead to the need to incorporate feminism into the portrayal of *Pak Yong* when played by a male actor? It is believed that the powerful portrayals by female actors in the part of *Pak Yong* have contributed to the ongoing ambiguity around the gender representation in this role, which is played by performers of both genders.

Farouk Zakaria, a scholar from Kelantan against *Mak Yong*, that was merely performed by men. He argues that the Kelantanese government's decision to prohibit it will endanger the preservation of *Mak Yong*. He expresses his opposition to the male singers' elegant singing and dancing gracefully in *Mak Yong* (pers. comm.). Despite facing considerable criticism, the presence of Rosnan Rahman as a male *Pak Yong* in *Mak Yong* Istana Budaya leaves a profound impact. Istana Budaya offers a new perspective to the Kuala Lumpur audience, which all these years has been exposed to the female actor playing this role. By featuring a male performer in this role, Rosnan has made vital contributions to the future and development of *Mak Yong* in Istana Budaya.

The Emergence of The Amateur

In 2006, Istana Budaya established its own *Mak Yong* group called *The Seri Nilam Mak Yong Group*, which includes the dancers from Istana Budaya. Istana Budaya has a group of resident artists called *Artistari* (dance artists), who are permanent dancers based at Istana Budaya. This troupe engages in both dance and acting in theatrical productions at Istana Budaya. The *Seri Nilam Mak Yong* dancers in Istana Budaya were taught several *Mak Yong* dances, including *Mengadap Rebab*, *Sedayung Mak Yong*, and *Ragam Dance*. They were also trained in singing significant songs and adopting the appropriate acting style. The rehearsals are led by the renowned prima donna, Fatimah Abdullah, who specialises in *Mak Yong*. She is the foremost expert in *Mak Yong* in Kuala Lumpur. Traditionally, *Mak Yong* practitioners acquired their expertise through extensive training over many years, under the guidance of experienced masters. Historically, the *Mak Yong* performers did not possess any written texts. The actors possess a deep comprehension of the storyline and possess the skill to effectively deliver the dialogues, which they have acquired through years of observation and attentive listening to past performers. Consequently, this skill has become ingrained in their bodies throughout the years.

Today, in Kuala Lumpur, all the *Mak Yong* performers are amateurs. The individuals comprising the *Seri Nilam Mak Yong Group* are non-professionals rather than experts in their field. For example, Siti Nor Habsah Sheikh Ahmad, a resident dancer at Istana Budaya, acquired the skills of *Mak Yong* within a period of six months in preparation for her performance in *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (Siti Nor Habsah, 2006). According to Siti Nor Habsah (2006), she acknowledges that each component of *Mak Yong*, including singing, dancing, acting, and delivering dialogues in the Kelantanese dialect, is very challenging to execute. Arja Lee, a Malaysian actor, appeared in the play *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011) and acknowledged the difficulty of learning *Mak Yong* despite having a foundation in singing, dancing, and acting. Nevertheless, attaining proficiency in the practice of *Mak Yong* proved to be exceedingly challenging and required a significant investment of time to achieve mastery. Arja dedicated a month to practicing *Mak Yong*. Therefore, the issue encountered by amateurs is that they must study their art within a restricted time frame and perform it when there is an impending performance. To enhance the skills of *Mak Yong* professionals in Kuala Lumpur, it is imperative for these group members to actively engage in constant training.

Mak Yong skills are often acquired through extensive experience and continuous observation, with most *Mak Yong* performers having undergone rigorous training for numerous

years. During the learning process, the performers observed, imitated, and committed to memory the dialogues, songs, and dances. After a prolonged duration, the performer ultimately attains mastery. Historically, *Mak Yong* was transmitted orally, but currently, performers are required to acquire knowledge from scripted sources, leading to the decline of improvisational methods. Training is conducted within a restricted timeframe, primarily focusing on the rehearsal phase in preparation for the scheduled performances. The training methods in Kelantan have undergone changes due to the influence of modern *Mak Yong* artists. Historically, rehearsals were not conducted, but rather a deliberation was held to determine which play would be presented. The *Mak Yong* practitioners are already familiar with the dialogues, songs, and dances. Nevertheless, in contemporary theatre performances, rehearsals are a necessary component, particularly for amateur actors. Today, it is remarkable that the responsibility of protecting and sustaining *Mak Yong* in Kuala Lumpur, and consequently in Malaysia, lies with the amateur performers.

Conclusion

This study examines the *Mak Yong* performances at Istana Budaya from their inception to the present, encompassing a total of eight shows spanning from 2003 to 2019. The venue for *Mak Yong* performances has undeniably modified the manner and objective of the performances. The purpose of this activity has shifted from providing entertainment and therapeutic benefits to villages to serving as a spectacle for modern metropolitan society. Currently, *Mak Yong* is presented in enclosed theatres with either a proscenium or thrust stage, catering to audiences who adhere to "Western standards of behaviour," which include sitting on seats (Brown 1999). Today, the whole raison d'être of *Mak Yong's* performance has changed.

Based on the conversations with practitioners and scholars, it is evident that there is significant criticism of *Mak Yong* Istana Budaya. For instance, Wan Midin Wan Majid (pers. comm.), a renowned *Peran* character in *Mak Yong* in Kelantan, asserts that *Mak Yong* has deviated from its original authenticity and has forfeited its essence. Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin (pers. comm.) a distinguished expert in traditional theatre, asserts that *Mak Yong* should preserve its traditional qualities and should not undergo modernization or modification. According to Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (2014), *Mak Yong* has become overly enthusiastic about incorporating beauty into its performances. Unsurprisingly, the *Mak Yong* practitioners hold a divergent perspective on this matter.

Che Nasir Yusoff (pers. comm.), a Master of Traditional Arts (Adiguru) at the National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Malaysia (ASWARA), contends that the preservation of *Mak Yong* and other traditional arts requires them to adapt to contemporary circumstances. He advocates for the integration of traditional theatre with the globalised world to reach a wider range of audiences. Che Nasir Yusuf contends that modernism should be integrated into the traditional form through the utilisation of current technologies to make it suitable for a contemporary audience. Fatimah Abdullah (pers. comm.), the director of *Mak Yong* shows at Istana Budaya, asserts that incorporating modern stage technology is essential to appealing to younger audiences during *Mak Yong* performances. However, it is important to avoid making excessive modifications to *Mak Yong* as they may potentially undermine its original shape.

Preservation is crucial while simultaneously necessitating adaptation to the current circumstances.

Istana Budaya must persistently endeavour to ensure that *Mak Yong* maintains its existence and acquires appreciation. Istana Budaya is required to annually stage a minimum of one *Mak Yong* production. The *Mak Yong* ensemble, *Seri Nilam*, must regularly engage in *Mak Yong* practice, regardless of whether they have a show or not. They require sufficient time to train, rehearse, and internalise these routines as an integral component of their performance. The critic's comment about the *Mak Yong* production lacking soul may be attributed to the fact that it was performed by non-professionals who learned the traditional performance in prompt and without understanding the Kelantanese language. Additionally, they had to acquire in one month what would typically require years to master. However, the presence of the *Seri Nilam* group serves as a beneficial initiative that promotes the development of *Mak Yong* among non-Kelantanese individuals and beginners. The *Mak Yong* performance at Istana Budaya must persist in its endeavours, undeterred by criticism, and view it as an opportunity for enhancement.

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