

# **Islamic Elements in Traditional Indonesian and Malay Theatre**

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## **I. Introduction: The Picture in Southeast Asia**

With the advent of Islam into Southeast Asia, a phenomenon for the commencement of which dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries have been indicated, various forms of cultural expression from the Middle- and Near-East found their way into the region. However, it is a moot point that, in the case of Muslim communities in Indonesia and Malaysia, Islam came as the last major religious experience, following various forms of what is loosely termed animism, “Hinduism” and Buddhism, and that despite the overwhelming acceptance of Islam, influences from the previous religious and spiritual experiences continue to be significant to this day, albeit sublimated, in, at times, uncomfortable situations of assimilation or accommodation. This is particularly evident in traditional rites and ceremonies, as well as in the performing arts.<sup>1</sup>

Islamic elements from the Middle- as well as Near-East are manifested in the region’s performing arts in four ways: firstly (a) through particular imported performance genres--theatre, music and dance-- as well as local variants of these; secondly (b) through the use of music, in particular and, to a limited extent, of dance within the context of theatre performances; thirdly (c) through the use of literary material in the dramatic repertoire of traditional theatre; and finally (d) through the reinterpretation of traditional literary content in terms of Islamic and, specifically, Sufi teachings.

As far as importation of genres and styles of performances go, the greatest impact, for obvious reasons, may be seen in vocal music, both religious and secular. Zikir, berzanji, marhaban, nasyid, and ghazal are the most important examples. (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 2004: 100).

In cases of music or dance performed in Muslim societies, such distinctions between religious and secular may not be as easily achieved. Clearly dances, such as that of the “whirling dervishes” of the Mevleviya Order in Turkey, are Islamic due to their origins, symbolic elements within them as well as their purpose. This order of Sufism never reached Southeast Asia. Similarly many of the so-called “Arab” dances did not reach Indonesia or Malaysia. Middle-Eastern influences, however are evident in the *seudati* dance developed in Aceh, north Sumatra, and even more in the *beksa golek Menak* created by Sultan Hamengkubuwana IX of Yogyakarta in 1941. (Sedyawati 1998: 72-73). This latter dance is based on the *wayang golek Menak* puppet theatre, discussed below.

Detailed reference to the theater forms will be made at appropriate points in the paper. It may be noted, however, that in general, compared to the situation in South and Southeast Asia, there is a distinct paucity of traditional theater genres in the Middle- and Near-East. Like elsewhere, in Iran dramatic elements exist in the form of traditional arts of the storyteller such as *naqal*, *rowza khani* and *pardeh khani*. Southeast Asian parallels of such forms do exist. For instance there are the Javanese *dalang jemplung* and *dalang genprung*, while in Malaysia *awang batil* and *tarik selampit* are still active. At this point of research, however, it is impossible to make any direct connections between the Malay-Indonesian forms and those in Iran or, for that matter, with similar forms in South Asia. Overall, the single most important form of traditional theatre with Islamic content and spirit in the Middle- and Near-East is *taziya*, usually referred to as the Persian passion play. This genre found its way through India into both Indonesia and Malaysia, resulting in significant developments in these countries.

References to the shadow play (*karaghoz*), reaching back several centuries, occur in several Islamic countries including Egypt, Turkey and Iran. (Tilakasiri 1999: 221-236). This form of theatre continues to be active in Turkey, while Egypt has witnessed recent attempts to revive it. The shadow play is one of the most important theatre forms in Indonesia and Malaysia. There is, however, no evidence of any direct contact between the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian examples of this genre, although parallels in other

ways, such as the interpretation of the genre as well as particular stories may be encountered.

A substantial corpus of literary material from the Middle- and Near-East came to find a place in Southeast Asian theatre. A clear distinction, however, needs to be made between strictly religious themes as opposed to secular ones. In theatre this boils down, essentially, to two things: content and purpose. There is, in fact, an extensive range of stories from Middle-Eastern, Near-Eastern and Indo-Muslim literature in Indonesian and Malaysian traditional theatre genres. Although such stories may be connected with the history and culture of Islam through settings and characters, the stories themselves may not, as is the case with the *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the Indo-Muslim romance *Gul Bakawakli*, be intended to serve as materials of religious instruction *per se*. On the other hand, such popular romances as *Laila Majnun* and *Hikayat Amir Hamza*, just to cite two outstanding instances, may be interpreted in terms of Islamic symbolism or mysticism.

## **II. Theatre Genres and Islamic Influences**

The most important of the theatre genres that came into Southeast Asia through direct transplantation is *taziya*. The most significant and full-fledged pre-existing genre that underwent adaptation for the incorporation of Islamic elements was the ancient shadow play (*wayang kulit*). Following the consolidation of this genre, several new variants of shadow play with Islamic content developed at various times. The third traditional theatre form that saw similar developments and for identical purposes of advancing Islamic teachings was *wayang golek Menak*, a variant form of the *wayang golek* doll puppet theatre, this time with new content based not on the classical repertoire of stories taken from the Hindu epics, but from the life history of Amir Hamza and legends built around him. For present purposes then, it would be appropriate to focus on these three theatre forms, taking them in terms of chronological development.

### III. Islamic Elements in Wayang Kulit Purwa

Although believed by Indonesian scholars that wayang kulit has been active in Java since pre-historic times, no evidence has emerged to confirm this view. This, of course does not preclude its existence prior to the more concrete evidence confirming the existence of shadow prior from the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In following centuries many different styles of wayang kulit, with distinctive dramatic content came into being. The classical *wayang kulit purwa* makes use of an extensive repertoire of dramatic plots (*lakon*) classified by Kats into four categories: those belonging to the animistic cycle, the Arjunasasra Bahu cycle, the Rama cycle based on the Ramayana and the Pandawa cycle based on the Mahabharata. (Brandon: 1970, 10-14).

Tradition has it that following the introduction of Islam into Java from as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, this genre of theatre was threatened with extinction. With the arrival on the island of the legendary nine Muslims saints (*wali sanga*), in the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup> and the important part that two of them, Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga, in particular as well as possibly others played in the traditional arts of the island, this trend was reversed, so that instead of suffering demise, the immensely popular and important shadow play form not only survived but experienced one of the most exciting artistic transformations in the annals of theatre.

This consolidation of wayang kulit purwa came about through a fusion of aesthetic principles deriving from all cultures--animist, Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic--experienced by the Javanese before western colonization. In essence, however, the underlying principles in this fusion remain Javanese, and thus reflect the indigenous philosophy known as *kejawen* (Javanese-ness). *Kejawen* is, in fact, seen as a variant version of Javanese Islam or agama Islam Jawa practiced by followers of the Abangan stream, it represents a syncretism of indigenous (*pribumi*) elements with those from Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. (Simuh 2002: 59-60). This contrasts with the kind of puritanical Islam practiced by the Santri Muslims who emphasize *shari'ah* rather than the liberal

syncretism based on local customary beliefs and practices (*adat*) adopted by the Abangan.

Essentially, though representing human and divine characters as well as ogres, giants and a whole range of other character-types from diverse mythologies, the designers of the wayang figures found a unique means of going beyond literalness into symbolism, and, even transcending symbolism, reaching into the realm of the mystical. By capturing the inner essence of the characters and representing this essence in the designs of the figures, the characters were at once moved away from reality as well as beyond religious controversy. This was done through the application of the concept of *wanda* which enabled puppet makers to represent external features as well as psychological or emotional states of their characters in the shapes and colours of their figures. Thus while the principal characters of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* originate in the pair of “Hindu” epics, in their physical representations as well as spiritual manifestations in wayang kulit purwa they no longer fully represent Hindu or even Indian values. Neither, it may be added, do they represent Islamic values as enshrined in the shari’ah. These values are manifested, rather, through mysticism. All literalism is thus transcended into universalism with a strong dose of indigenous cultural values.

Simply put, this sort of transformation came about in the shadow play through two processes. Wayang kulit was first made acceptable to the new Muslim community in Java by a reinterpretation of particular episodes (*lakon*) and characters in terms of Islam. For instance in one of the plays derived from the epic, *Wahyu Nugroho*, the Pandava brothers, protagonists of the *Mahabharata*, five in number, were interpreted symbolically as the five fundamental principles (*rukun*) or pillars of Islam. (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof: 1994: 275). This philosophy was boosted by the direct and exemplary involvement of several of the wali sanga, particularly Sunan Kalijaga, in the development of wayang as well as in other performing arts. It is believed that in 1443 Sunan Kalijaga made wayang figures out of goatskin, and the wayang then was developed into its present form. Sunan Kalijaga himself performed as puppeteer, assuming different names in different districts. In addition he is reputed to have performed the masked play (*wayang topeng*).

In their efforts to promote Islam the nine saints invented new stories both within the framework of the Indian epics, or as extensions of the principal plots using original characters but newly-invented episodes. In time these episodes came to be regarded as branch stories (*lakon carangan*) of the Mahabharata or Ramayana. Among the most important of the newly-developed stories belonging to the principal plot are *Cerita Dewa Ruci* and *Cerita Jimat Kalima Sada*, both written by Sunan Kalijaga. *Cerita Dewa Ruci* will be discussed separately. *Cerita Jimat Kalima Sada*, “shows that when one possesses the weapon or charm (*jimat, azimat*) named Kalima Sada one will be safe forever” (Umar Hasyim: 27). *Kalimah Shahadah* is of course the Muslim formula affirming faith in the religion, by accepting Allah as the One and only God, and Muhammad as His last prophet and messenger. Thus Darmokusumo or Puntadewa, as Yudhistira, the eldest of the five Pandawa brothers, is named in the wayang stories, does not die because he possesses this charm. His end finally comes when he has clearly understood the meaning of the *jimat*; he then attains liberation, *moksha*. (Umar Hasyim, n.d.: 27). In Sufi terminology this concept would be referred to as *fana*. The *lakon carangan* entitled *Petruk becomes King (Petruk Dadi Ratu)* centres around the figure of Petruk, one of the comic figures (*punakawan*) in Javanese traditional theatre. Like his companion *punakawan*, he is an invented character non-existent in Indian epics. The story, according to traditional views, indicates that no matter how low one’s position or status is in life, one can, with the possession of Kalima Sada, become ennobled and highly respected. (Umar Hasyim, n.d.: 28).

Thus, in addition to physical changes to the figures, reinterpretation of traditional plots and the creation of new ones, wayang kulit purwa, already an immensely popular medium to start with, was made suitable for performance in Javanese Muslim communities; it even served as a vehicle for the propagation (*dakwah*) of Islam as well as the spread of Sufi teachings. Despite all this, however, it must be mentioned that wayang kulit as well as some of the other traditional performing arts remain controversial, at least from the perspective of orthodox Muslims.

The next stage involved the bringing into wayang of mystical interpretations, something we shall return to in the oncoming discussion of the *Dewa Ruci* story. Before going on to that particular topic, however, it may be worthwhile taking a look briefly at some of interpretations given by the wali sanga to the wayang kulit and other performing arts in terms of mysticism. There is a particularly interesting report that succinctly summarizes their involvement in the traditional performing arts and their views regarding the meanings of these art forms (Rinkes 1996: 123-150). At the same time, an attempt is made to bring about an understanding among Javanese Muslims of the four degrees of mysticism through the performing arts. The shadow play is seen as a reflected “image of the Law” or shari’ah. “The wayang reflects all humanity, the puppeteer (*dalang*) corresponds to Allah, Creator of the universe.” (Rinkes 1996: 130). This passage goes on to see the higher stages of the mystic’s journey in other performing arts: the barong symbolizes *tarikah*, or the mystical path to the “Real” (Rinkes 1996: 130), *hakikat* (reality or essence) is seen in the topeng or mask dance (Rinkes 1996: 131), and finally the image of *ma’rifat* (gnosis) is reflected in the *ronggeng*. (Rinkes 1996: 132).

#### **IV. Development of new Theatre Genres**

A third element which brought a direct connection between Islam and the shadow play was the development of new forms making use of dramatic materials derived from Islamic legends or history. In this respect two non-classical styles of shadow play are noteworthy-- *wayang kulit Adam makrifat* and *wayang kulit Menak*. The former, now no longer active, told the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (*taman firdaus*) until their expulsion from paradise (*syurga*) to earth (*dunia*). Other themes included Islamic mystical and moral teachings. The more important of these forms is wayang kulit Menak, designed to depict the life of Amir Hamza, known in Java as Wong Agung Menak, Menak being an ancient Javanese title. A variant form of this is *wayang kulit Sasak*, also depicting the story of Amir Hamza, a maternal uncle of Prophet Muhammad. Dedicated puppets, differing from those of the classical wayang kulit purwa, were created for *wayang golek Menak*, reflecting Middle-Eastern rather than South Asian aesthetics,

while the repertoire was drawn from the local version of the Amir Hamza story known as *Serat Menak*. Before going on to the Amir Hamza story, it may be worthwhile recording here that a form of doll puppet theatre using three-dimensional wooden figures and performing without a screen, had also been developed in imitation of wayang kulit purwa. This is known as wayang golek. According to the ancient book *Serat Pakem*, wayang golek was devised by Sunan Kudus, one of the nine saints. Like wayang kulit purwa, wayang golek purwa performs stories from the Hindu epics. An important newer variant of this, wayang golek Menak, was, once again, like wayang kulit Menak, dedicated to performances of Serat Menak. It has remained popular in Java to this day.

## **V. The Amir Hamza Story**

Hamza bin Abdul Muttalib played an important role in the early development of Islam and was a pillar of personal support for Prophet Muhammad. He was martyred at the Battle of Uhud on 19<sup>th</sup> March 625 by an Abyssinian slave. The origins of stories connected with Hamza remain unknown. They belong to a mode of story-telling “that combines popular fantasies and literary tropes to produce highly readable and entertaining stories. These stories give an account of heroic deeds and lavish banquets whose very-out-of-the ordinary flamboyance places them on the two extremes of legendary lives and thus marks their heroes from mere mortals”. (Dabashi 2007: xi). The collection of stories was brought together in a recent publication, *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*. However, while the cycle of stories is loosely based on historical facts, much creativity has been lavished upon them to make them suitable for varied audiences ranging from “the high courts of powerful kings and famous princes down to the inhabitants of crowded bazaars and the winding streets and back alleys of very ordinary people”. (Dabashi 2007: xii). Arab, Persian and India Muslim elements found an apt combination in the stories, which reached many countries from North Africa to Asia with versions of the story narrated in many languages. It was known in Indo-Persian versions in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century. (Dabashi 2007: xiv), and it is very likely that it was from South Asia that the story spread into Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Central Java the story of Amir Hamza absorbed local influences, including those from tales belonging to the highly popular Panji romance dealing with the adventures of Raden Inu Kertapati and Galuh Chandra Kirana. The whole cycle of stories or episodes (lakon) developed from the Malay-language *Hikayat Amir Hamza* came to be featured in the shadow play, wayang kulit Menak, and the doll puppet theatre, wayang golek Menak. These stories are said to belong to the Menak cycle in the same fashion as the older, animistic and Hindu stories based on the epics were classified according to their sources of their origin, as mentioned above. In addition to Amir Hamza, his sons and grandsons appear in some of the later episodes. In traditional theatre, the Menak stories were at times placed on par with the Indian epics and the Panji stories. Thus in wayang kulit Menak as well as wayang golek menak the hero has a pair of servant-companions, punakawan, as do the heroes of the older wayang stories. In the Menak cycle these comic figures are named Marmaya or Umarmaya and Marmadi or Umar Madi. Clearly the imagination of Javanese puppeteers was at play here, while traditional concepts regarding the character of the shadow play and wayang golek adapted and made the hikayat suitable for performances in these genres. Over the centuries since their first introduction into Java these tales have been considerably expanded, and from Java the Menak romances spread to the islands of Madura, Bali as well as Lombok. No indication, however, is found of their use in theatre beyond these areas. In Malaysia there has never been any theatre form dedicated to the story of Amir Hamza.

## **VI. Lakon Dewa Ruci**

Apart from the development of new styles of wayang kulit and the creation of wayang golek for the purposes of presenting materials associated with Islam one other important development was the manner in which certain stories of the classical repertoire, derived from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, were reinterpreted to provide room for the inclusion of Islamic and Sufi ideas. There are several *wahyu* (or revelation) stories in the dramatic repertoire of the classical Javanese shadow play. By far the best-known and most important of these mystical ones is Dewa Ruci, also known as *Bhima Suci*.

Woodward suggests that the story “appears to have been written during the period of transition from Hinduism to Islam, using Hindu-Javanese mythology to present the Sufi theory of the mystical path.” (Woodward 1989: 193).

The story goes as follows: During the time of crisis represented by the great Bharatayuddha war, Bhima, the third of the Pandawa brothers, seeks, a clear sense of direction before entering the battlefield. Undertaking a journey laden with physical and spiritual challenges, including struggles with monsters symbolizing the lower passions, a journey which may be likened to a pilgrimage, Bhima seeks, and eventually encounters, the inner reality of the Self in the form of the god Dewa Ruci, in fact a tiny version of himself. Bhima’s expanded consciousness of Reality and the Self prepares him for a better understanding of the Creation and his own place in it. Thus enlightened, he is ready to enter the fray which leads to total annihilation of the Pandawa and their cousins, the Korawa.

According to Woodward, in Javanese literature, lakon Dewa Ruci clearly illustrates “the concepts of the struggle of the soul against nepsu and that of the pilgrimage to the self”.<sup>4</sup> (Woodward: 193). He adds further that informants, when asked to describe the most important elements of the lakon, generally mention the conquest of passion and the pilgrimage to the self, which is often compared with the pilgrimage to Mecca. “Many respond that this is the true pilgrimage and the hajj is only an external (lahir) form”. (Woodward, p 194.)<sup>5</sup> On the hajj itself and its meaning, there are many interpretations in Sufi literature in general as well as among the Santri in Indonesian Sufism. “Some kejawen mystics describe the hajj as an entirely mystical experience, explaining that it is not necessary to be physically present in Mecca, or at least that one may travel to Mecca in the same way as Muhammad made his journey to heaven.” (Woodward 1989: 194). One may see in these views parallels with those of Muhyuddin Ibn an Arabi, Mansur al-Hallaj, Jalaluddin Rumi and other well-known mystics and poets.

Through this and other such tales from the traditional epic-based repertoire, now imbued with Islamic, and more particularly Sufi, teachings of the *wahdatul wujud* strand associated with Ibn al-Arabi, wayang kulit purwa puppeteers at once reconcile religious differences and elevate the events depicted in the wayang far above the realm of the literal. Sufism was already introduced into Java by the time of the wali sanga, and one of them, Sunang Gunung Jati was initiated into the Kubra, Shattari and Naqshbandi orders. (van Brusnessen 1995, 165-200). Sufism has maintained a strong hold in Java through the establishment of many orders (tariqa), allowing for liberal and at times ingenious, even controversial interpretations of Islam. This situation certainly proved beneficial to many forms of literary and creative expression. To some extent through the spread of spiritual teachings and the shadow play, both of which reached the Malay peninsula from Java, wayang kulit Siam puppeteers too were influenced, even if such esotericism was not fully understood by them.

### **VIII. Taziya**

The origins of taziya have been traced to pre-Islamic Iranian rituals connected with the death of the mythic hero, Siavush, the son of Kia-Kaus. (Malekpour 2004: 43). It is believed to have evolved into developed theatre form in the mid-eighteenth century, this time built around legends connected with the martyrdom of Husein, the son of Ali, Islam's fourth caliph at the Battle of Karbala in the Hijri year 61, corresponding to 680 CE. Malekpour sees taziya as a parallel to other passion plays such as those of Osiris in Egypt with which this genre shares many elements including mourning for the dead, processions, choral laments, as well as the carrying of coffins and banners, (Malekpour 2004:43- 49). The custom of mourning the death of Husein is believed to have started during the Buyid Dynasty (945-1055 CE), and to these ceremonies theatre elements, such as story telling (rowza khani, naghal and pardeh khani), music, singing by a solo singer (*maddah*), as well as a repertoire of stories featuring figures from the family of Ali and their progeny were added at some date, leading to the consolidation of taziya as full-fledged theatre by the time of the Qajar Dynasty (1787-1925). Taziya is, in fact, the only form of theatre directly connected with Islam.

From Iran *taziya* spread into India and Pakistan as well as other countries with Shia populations, and even into countries without Shias. This appears to have been the case in Thailand (Marchinowski 2005, p. ), in Aceh and elsewhere on the island of Sumatra, as well as in Penang, Malaysia. In the case of Thailand the presence of Iranians, who exerted a measure of influence upon the political and religious life of the local community, has been noted. It is also likely that certain cultural practices of Islam came to be introduced through the presence of other Muslim communities. Although traders from Iran and the Middle-East are known to have visited Southeast Asia since times before in arrival of Islam, there is no evidence of the presence of Shia communities amongst Indonesians while the small numbers of Shia in Malaysia originated in South Asia in the twentieth century. Evidence to support the presence of Shia influence in Indonesia, however, may be found in the activities of various non-orthodox Muslim groups and movements.

Southeast Asia received *taziya* from South Asia rather than directly from Iran in the late nineteenth century. There is some evidence for *taziya* performances done in the kingdom of Ayuthia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Marcinkowski 2005: 26, 56):

At this point Muhammad Ibrahim inserts the important information of the Iranian communities [sic] custom of performing *ta'ziyah* ceremonies in honour of the martyrdom of the prophet's grandson al-Husayn b. Ali b. Abi Talib at Karbala. These ceremonies even used to be paid for by the (Buddhist) Siamese monarch, who also provided a special building and other facilities for that purpose.

This is an unusual circumstance, in that *taziya* received support from the local authorities in a non-Muslim environment.

## **IX. Transformation of Taziya in Malaysia and Indonesia**

In the case of Malaysia and Indonesia the introduction of taziya came about in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest performances took place on the island of Penang in either 1845 or 1874, with the genre staged by Shia Muslims from north India in the British *sepoy* regiments serving on that island following its acquisition by the British in 1786. Similarly in Indonesia, members of sepoy regiments, said to be from Bengal, introduced taziya into Padang Pariaman, and from there the genre seems to elsewhere in the same general region.

No records of early performances are available, but as seen from descriptions from the early decades of the twentieth century, tazia performances in Penang did not make use of scripts, or they had been replaced with brief sketches in all likelihood improvised. Costume parades involving performing wearing masks and sack-cloth as a sign of mourning, strolling minstrels singing songs connected with the martyrdom at Karbala, and decorated carts in procession, drawing model tombs (*tabut*)—these were some of the salient features. By the time written and photographic evidence becomes available, from the first decades of the twentieth century, instead of taziya a new name, boria or boria had come into use. There remains a great deal of speculation as to what this term means.

## **X. From Taziya to Boria in Malaysia**

Early performances were divided into two sections—the day time procession called *Kuli kalin*, and the night-time theatre performance featuring dramatic skits. *Kuli kalin* participants wore masks or painted their faces. They wore loose garments made of coarse sack-cloth, *pyjama kurta* and masks, with Malay or western clothes coming into use at a later stage. This form of boria, however, soon saw further transformation due principally to the fact that the Shia population of Penang, never large to begin with, was further diminished with the demise or return of Shia Muslims to the Indian sub-continent. With the increasing participation of Sunni Muslims, especially those belonging to the Tamil-

speaking and mixed Indo-Malay (Jawi Peranakan) communities, boria gave up its religious character.

The transformation has been phenomenal in every sense of the word. Performances are held indoors in large auditoriums, or still in open spaces to grace special occasions such as birthdays of celebrities or public holidays. Processional boria has died out, and even open air staging is rare. The original Indo-Persian music was replaced by Arab-Malay music played on such musical instruments as frame drums (rebana), gongs and gambus (oud). The use of keroncong music later became fashionable, and following World War II, western musical instruments and popular styles of music came into use. At this time too came the involvement of women as singers and dancers, and even as lead singers (tukang karang) in male, female, or mixed troupes. Female impersonation has been retained as a matter of style rather than necessity, when comic skits are featured. Boria competitions are occasionally held in Penang. Thus it is only through generous imagination that boria can be described as a theatre in any sense of the word, for it is a laudatory form of song and dance performance, with emphasis, in contemporary performances, upon improvised lyrics.

## **XI. From Taziya to Tabuik in Sumatra**

Taziya, locally known as tabuik, was first seen in the city of Bengkulu on the island of Sumatra. Today in addition to Bengkulu, the activities, take place in Pariaman, and Padang on the west coast of Sumatra annually on the anniversary of the death of Husein. This schedule at least indicates a clear connection between tabuik and the martyrdom of Husein. The story of how this tradition developed is traced to mystical stories which came into being following Hussein's death. It is said that his body was miraculously flown to Heaven on the back of a buraq, where it had been placed by angels. (Sedyawati: 26). This event was reportedly witnessed by a Bengali Muslim, possibly a soldier (locally, cipei, corruption of *sipahi* meaning soldier). It appears that north Indian Shia Muslims had been visiting Indonesia's shores for many centuries, first as traders and later as soldiers sent to defend British holdings particularly in Bengkulu. From there the

community spread to other British holdings in Pariaman and Padang, and thus the commemoration of Husein's death was soon integrated into the local traditions of the Muslims.

Today, the best known tabuik activities take place in Pariaman over the last ten days of Muharram. These include *ma-ambiak tanah* (fetching the soil), *menabeh batang pisang* (hopping down the banana plant), *mahatma* (carrying the fingers), *ma-arak saroban* (parading the turban) and *ma-oyak tabuik* (shaking the tabuik). All of these activities have their symbolic values. (Sedyawati 1998: 27).

In general the sequence of activities includes, on the first few days, the preparation of the tabuik, the collection of soil from a river-bed, the burning of incense, as well as the offering of prayers. The soil is put in a pot, wrapped with white cloth and placed in the small tomb-like structure known as *daragah*. The soil in a pot wrapped in white represents Husein's tomb, while the *daragah* represents the resting place of the soldiers who participated in the Karbala war. On the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, following evening prayers, takes place the hacking of the banana trunks, representing or re-enacting the Kerbala battle in all its violence and fury. On the 7<sup>th</sup> finger-like objects are carried high in procession through the town, the parade moving slowly like a funeral procession with musical accompaniment. The objects represent Husein's severed fingers, as well as symbolize his skill in battle. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of Muharram takes place the parading of the turban. A piece of cloth representing Husein's turban is borne in a wooden box (*panja*). The procession begins at midday and goes on well into the night. During the next three days, also from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, the tabuik, now completed in two parts, representing the head and the body, is assembled, and topped with the turban. This activity is known as *tabuik naik pengkek*, which means "promoted or elevated to a higher class". Several troupes, representing different villages, may participate in the procession with the building of elaborately decorated tabuik towers. In addition, other figures, such as a lion, are paraded through the town and some are discarded into the sea or river.

The annual event takes place on the anniversary of Husein's death where the towering paper and bamboo structures representing Husein's funeral bier are drawn in procession. The complete funerary tower is paraded by a huge crowd, who knock and shake it as it is pulled back and forth. The procession is accompanied by frenzied beating of drums as well as the shouting of Husein's name. This represents Husein's ascent to heaven on the back of the buraq.

Emotionally charged at times, the tabuik in Sumatra may be seen both as a ritual and as mere cultural activity, since those involved are non-Shia Muslims. In its elaboration it is reminiscent of the parades and other activities held during the first ten days of Muharram in places such as Lucknow in India, without, however, some of the other activities, such as *marsiya*, *noha* or *soz*, involving sung or spoken lamentations in the Urdu language. Tabuik certainly retains much of the flavour of *taziya* as compared to the Malaysian *boria*.

## **XII. Conclusion**

The above discussion has focused upon those elements in Southeast Asian performing arts that have a clear connection with Islam both in terms of ritual-based performances as well as dramatic content. In addition to the material discussed above, there is a substantial body of literary borrowing from the Middle- and Near-East as well as Islamic India. The most significant of these continued until recent times to be featured in *bangsawan* and the theatre styles, such as *stambul* it spawned. *Bangsawan* came into being as an offshoot of the Urdu *Parsee* theatre which developed in western India. From its parent form, apart from presentational techniques which combined western as well as local elements, it borrowed a portion of the traditional dramatic repertoire, including a number of Persian tales such as that of *Rustam and Zohrab* based upon *Firdausi's* epic, *Shah Nama*. As far as Arabic literature goes several stories, including *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Sinbad the Sailor*, were taken directly out of the pages of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Other sources provided the literary romances such as *Laila Majnun* and *Hikayat Amir Hamza*. From the Indo-Muslim imagination came a range of fantasies such as *Gul*

*Bakawali*, and *Sabz Pari wa Gulfam*, better known as *Indra Sabha*, written especially for the Parsee theatre, and one of the greatest of the stories in that genre. While embellished with Middle-or Near-Eastern trappings, these tales were not necessarily Islamic in character or spirit.

Yet there were connections too with Islam and its cultural manifestations in certain genres of traditional Malay, and more particularly, Indonesian performing arts. These contacts made for exciting developments in the local genres, giving them both vibrancy as well as depth, especially where Sufism came into play. While changing their character in keeping with local historical and cultural developments, particularly recent rethinking regarding virtually every aspect of Islam, these extremely strong connections with Middle-Eastern, Near-Eastern as well as South Asian Islamic cultural forms continue to exist today. Some of these connections are only now beginning to be understood. Further investigations will certainly prove rewarding.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For general background information on the various influences on traditional Southeast Asian theatre refer to Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof. *Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia: A Preliminary Survey*.

<sup>2</sup> Sri Mulyono, in Chapter 1 of *Wayang: Asal-usul, Filsafat dan Masa Depan*, traces the Javanese shadow play theatre to prehistoric times. See pages 6-44.

<sup>3</sup> There are many uncertainties regarding the origins of the nine saints, their precise number, their relationships with each other, as well as the dates when they were active. Much of the information is undoubtedly coloured by legends. It is evident that several of the early personalities came in from outside Java, possibly from Gujerat in India and Champa, reaching Java through Aceh in north Sumatra. Malik Maulana Ibrahim, the first of the nine, is believed to have arrived in 1404, and died in 1440. Sunan Ampel was born in Champa in 1401, and died in Demak in 1481. Sunan Bonang was born in 1465 and died 1525. Sunan Drajat was born in 1470; Sunan Kudus died in 1550; Sunan Kalijaga was born in 1460 and lived for a hundred years; Sunan Gunung Jati was born in 1448 and died in 1580 reputedly at the age of more than 130 years. Thus they were active in Java from at least the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> The word nepsu here is a variant of the Arabic nafs which refers to the soul or even breath. It generally refers to the lower soul, and even to baser desires, while the proper word for soul or spirit is ruh (in Malay-Indonesian roh).

<sup>5</sup> Zahir and batin are term in Islam which refer, respectively, to the outer exoteric and the inner esoteric aspects of belief and knowledge. Zahir (the Manifest) and Batin (the Hidden) are also two of the names of Allah. In this text lahir is a variant transliteration of zahir.

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