

# Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Issues of Cultural Identity

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*Lecture delivered at the  
Seoul National University Korea,  
on the 12th November 1992*

*Music and dance events in traditional Southeast Asian societies were not simple theatrical events for a paying audience. They were usually organized for several functions simultaneously. Subli in the Philippines, Chinese opera in Singapore, Mak Yong in Malaysia, Wayang Purwa in Java, Lakorn Chatri in Thailand, all demonstrate the fact that in this region theatrical events or rituals which have music and dance elements serve a variety of social, religious or political purposes much more explicitly than the performing arts termed in the west.*

Anthropologists of the arts and expressive culture recognize the importance of the studies of performance in relation to social function and cultural development processes. Their interest is not only confined to the creative processes and institutions of art, but also to all aspects that are related to patronage systems, social institutions, mediators, economic structure, technology and political environment of art products. In the last decade, Southeast Asian countries in varying degrees experienced rapid changes in economic development, urbanization and westernization. Industrialization and mass communication technology have dismantled the traditional social structure and have changed the life styles of the masses. Regional imbalance in political power and economic development have further created social and cultural problems. Unlike the traditional societies where cultural unity was expressed in local communities, contemporary Southeast Asian societies, demarcated by new political boundaries, are characterized by the dichotomy of indigenous culture and imported culture, dominant group and periphery group cultures, nationalism and globalization.

Faced with such encounters of cultures and cultural forces, Southeast Asians are compelled to search for a path that is suitable for them. What kind of culture do they want? Each Southeast Asian country has its own agenda and priority.

Issues range from identity crisis, creation of a new national culture, conflicts derived from regional imbalance in economic development and power sharing, fear of erosion of

indigenous values, morals and cultures in the waves of westernization and globalization. These issues, whether it is nationalism or national integration, urbanization or multiculturalism, mass culture transmitted by electronic media, are invariably related to the key issue of cultural identity and ethnicity.

It is my intention to review these issues, in the variety of ways they are reflected in the performing arts of Southeast Asian countries. For the convenience of discussion, I will generalize the common concerns of these societies and then examine the different preoccupations and particularity of each of the six countries I have chosen to discuss: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. These six countries, since 8th August 1967, form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Through its Committee of Culture and Information (COCI), it organizes numerous projects in literature, performing arts and visual art. These activities are funded by the ASEAN Cultural Fund with financial resources supplied by Japan. The chief objective of the ASEAN COCI, is to promote intra-ASEAN cooperation in the field of culture and information. The cultural activities of COCI and other non-government organizations have indeed promoted greater understanding amongst the peoples in these countries. The continuous efforts made by the governments and the media has to a great extent projected a strong symbolic solidarity in cultural expressions. Regional theatre festival, dance festival, song festival, music workshop and music camp and publications of plays have

all provided opportunities for exchanging ideas and information.

What then are the similar concerns in the question of cultural identity?

Amongst the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has never been colonized by any western power, largely due to the clever manipulation of the situations by the kings. Court arts in Thailand, including dance, masked play, Khon, music, and large shadow play have been patronized by the kings while folk performing arts have been organized mainly for religious functions. In those days, dance and music training and the imparting of performing arts knowledge took place mainly on the palace grounds or in the households of the ruling class. Producing court theatre events enhanced the social prestige of the members of the households of the ruling class. The masked dance and dance drama in the early period (14th-18th century) were the sole property of the kings. They were regarded as the symbol of power similar to other royal regalias such as crown, sword and throne. These court performances were state rituals that displayed and confirmed the political legitimacy of the kings. The form and contents of these court performing arts manifested the ideology of kingship and offered a model of behavior. Gradually, these court art forms were secularized but continued to be used at state organized activities and functions as the refined dance and music became important cultural symbols of the Thais.

The School of Dramatic Arts was set



*Touristic dance at its best at Rose Garden, Thailand*

up by the Department of Fine Arts of the Ministry of Education in 1934, to teach traditional and folk music, dance, and drama. Today many more such schools have been established. They are in Chiang Mai, Nakon Sri Thammarat, Angthong, Roi Et, Sukhothai, Chantaburi and Patalung. In addition there are thirty-six teachers' colleges offering diploma and degree courses in traditional performing arts.

Also under the Ministry of Education is the National Culture Commission, created in 1981 to promote cultural activities as well as cultural cooperation among neighboring countries. It organizes national festivals for puppet shows, dance and drama and plays an important role of disseminating cultural information. The National Culture Commission also manages the showpiece performing venue, the Thailand Cultural Centre, which was actually donated by the Japanese Government. The national anthem is played at the beginning and at the end of theatre performances. At government organized theatre events, civil servants of all ranks are expected to be in uniform and line up according to protocol for the dignitaries, whether princesses, prince, Queen or King. These practices are cultural expressions that enhance loyalty and national identity.

With strong support from the royal family and the government, traditional court performances and the 'refined version' of folk performing arts continue to have a base: institutions teach and promote them and the tourist industry provides employment opportunities. Even for those who are not engaged

in the traditional folk theatre, music and dance would have acquired some basic knowledge of appreciation in their school days where simple Thai dance and music are compulsory subjects at primary education level.

However, the National Culture Commission's recent Puppet Theatre Festival failed to attract audiences at the Thailand Cultural Centre, which contrasted with the great successes of a local pop star's week-long concert and the Russian Bolshoi's steeply priced ballet, alarming the cultural agencies and education institutions. The worry is, if Thai cultural shows continue to lose out in their competition for audiences with pop shows and foreign shows, does it mean that they will gradually lose interest in their own culture? The 40 drama productions staged by mainly amateur theatre groups yearly are mostly translations or adaptations of western plays while ballet schools often stage much simplified versions of western popular ballets such as "Nutcracker" or "Coppolier". Does this mean that they are dominated by western art products?

Further investigation reveals the contrary. Leading directors Rassami Paoluengtong and young director Damkerng Thitapiyasak as well as other serious minded dramatists are making efforts to write and stage local plays which reflect social reality. Some of these attempts might fall short in their aesthetic merits but given time, some mature writing ought to emerge as they accumulate experience in their years of staging western plays. Although most directors and drama lecturers at universities are trained in the west,

some, like Mattani Rutnin and Pornrat Damrung are very concerned with the need for expressing the emotions of contemporary Thai society. Thai culture is not all Thai classical dance, music and puppet shows. Their cultural identity thus cannot be interpreted in only the motifs of temple paintings or Thai classic dance postures.

The modern dance pieces staged by Chulalongkorn University in February 1992 and the dance that was created to depict the military oppression of democratic movements by Russian trained ballet choreographer Bancha Suannanonda are examples of cultural dynamics in contemporary Thai society. There are, admittedly and quite naturally, some poor imitations of American modern dance which have been staged by amateur dance groups where both form and content have no relevance to the Thai society. Such experiments are part of the process of cultural borrowing and it takes time for locals to indigenize foreign cultural forms.

Among Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines is arguably the most experienced in indigenizing foreign music, dance and drama. The Philippines was colonized by the Spanish from 1565 until 1898. When Spain and America were at war over the right to rule Cuba the Spanish ended its conflicts with America by ceding the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States. It cost the Filipinos enormous loss in lives and property before they were eventually liberated from America on the 4th July, 1946.

In their long years of being colonized



*Nongchik Ghani, Singapore's Malay dance doyen  
showing a Chinese dancer a step*



*Philippines choreographer Edna Vida staging a  
dance drama at the Culture Centre of the  
Philippines*



by the Spanish and the Americans, the Filipinos were imposed with many cultural forms and practises, from law, constitution, education, religion to expressive culture. It is amazing to note how they borrowed, adapted and indigenized the many forms of music and dance.

Sarsuwela, Komedia, and Sinakulo, were all imported from the Spanish several hundred years ago but have become indigenized.

Sarsuwela nowadays, for example, has moved away from its simplistic stereotypical love story, although it retains the format of integrating music and dance, like the original Spanish form. For instance, Nicarnor Tiongson in his recreation of a page from revolution history in 1907, "Pilipinas Circa 1907" made a highly successful new Sarsuwela.

The Spanish used theatre to subjugate the people during their rule. Komedia is a case in point. It is a theatre form which combines elements of dance, songs and dialogue in a comical way. The story is centered on princes and princesses who differ in their religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is always the Christians who win, thus explicitly discrediting Islam and implying the superiority of the colonizer's religion. Such a presentation of course is no longer tolerated. The new Komedia, like Sarsuwela, is able to take up current issues that relate to society.

The passion play, called Sinakulo, used to feature Jesus Christ as a hero. Today, new writers create their own heroes. Aurelio Tolentino's Sinakulo written in the 1920s has a

worker character replacing Jesus Christ as the hero to lead them in their struggle against the colonizers.

Apart from the successful contemporization and indigenization of the imported performing arts forms, the Philippines also has a unique grassroots theatre movement that focuses attention on the social-political turmoils of the country. This movement, however, under the Marcos dictatorship was marginalized as the mainstream theatre was dominated by American western theatre and heavily supported by the government with the previous First Lady Mrs. Marcos as patron. The elegant cultural centre of the Philippines which rises on the sea front of Roxas Boulevard, was Mrs. Marcos' pet project. It was the base of Ballet Philippines as well as theatre companies. Since Corazon Aquino, widow of the assassinated opposition leader installed after a four-day bloodless revolution in 1986, cultural policy has changed and re-oriented its direction.

Heavy subsidies of western arts companies was questioned and the new establishment asserted the promotion of national cultural identity through the arts. Legitimacy is not based on successes in London and New York; artistic judgment is now made locally.

Unlike Thailand, the Philippines is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country, with over three dozen major ethnic groups scattered mostly in the 11 major islands. The two largest islands, Luzon and Mindanao, contain 60 percent of the country's population of 56 million.

Although Tagalog is the national language, until recently, it was not widely spoken. The elite and the middle class, mostly educated in English in schools and universities, speak little or no Tagalog. It is only in recent years, through the advocacy of the government, that Tagalog regained its importance. In the south, where the Muslim Filipinos live, Islamic arts, community theatre and indigenous theatre such as Bayok are now regaining popularity. Gone is the inferiority complex.

In this process of adjustment and change, performing arts artistes, whether the city-based mainstream theatre represented by the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, the metropolitan theatre and the universities, or the community theatres which are thriving in student clubs, workers' unions, peasant associations, all realize the importance of indigenous theatre and are now more actively learning, researching and using elements of traditional theatre in their new creative works. Such actions are indications of the new psyche.

Although Indonesia was invaded by the Netherlands for almost as long a time as the Philippines by Spain and America since the 1640s, the Indonesians are to a much lesser extent acculturated in the arts by their colonizers, although Christianity retains a dominant presence in the 13,677 islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

The Dutch's long years of bloody military campaigns provoked more resistance and stronger political



*Participants of SPAFA Training Course on Labanotation, finding a way to record Southeast Asian dance*



*Ritual on dance, performed by the Malaysian Chinese Cultural Society in Melaka, choreographed by Koh Eng Kiam*

reaction than they probably envisaged. Thus culturally speaking, the Indonesians are alienated to the Dutch practices; after all the Dutch were more interested in economic exploitation. More ironic is the fact that the Indonesians who attended the Dutch schools were the ones who sowed the seeds of revolution and offered hope of independence.

However, it was the Dutch who introduced the proscenium stage to the Indonesians which in a short time gained acceptance and replaced the open air space of the traditional performing arts presentation. Folk art forms such as Saman dance in Aceh, Tlenjeng dance and Ketopang in Java, Randai in Minangkabau, Legong in Jakarta, Wayang Orang in Surabaya, Wayang Gelek in Bandung and Wayang Kulit in Bali are presented for marriages, circumcisions, harvesting and other religious rites or ceremonies. These were in essence, cultural expressions of social solidarity. Performances were organized under the patronage of local nobilities.

The court arts, such as Langendriyan and Wayang Orang Kraton in Jogjakarta, Legong Koraton in Bali and Bedaya Ketapoan in Surakarta, were at one time regularly presented at the Kraton performance pavilions. The large contingent of dancers and musicians were employed by the sultans to present the highly stylized dance and theatre for state functions and religious ceremonies.

These court arts have been secularized and have become some of the most loved art forms of Indonesians.

There is no doubt that western

influence is evident in the process of performing arts development. In the colonial days, drama enthusiasts wrote plays in the style of text they studied in the Dutch schools. Post independence saw the beginning of young artists going abroad to study dance, music, film and theatre, especially so in the last decades. But similar to other countries in Southeast Asia, young intellectuals value the function of theatre as a means of social communication and political expression. Western plays were adapted to the Indonesian context and original plays which discussed social issues were produced.

At times, the authorities found it hard to permit challenges to the establishment or provocation of resentment. Whenever contemporary theatre productions are viewed by the censorship board as too threatening they are banned.

The government has been actively supporting traditional performing arts and has set up seven government tertiary-level colleges in the nation to train young performers, teachers and researchers.

Each year, the Directorate of Arts, under the Ministry of Education and Culture, organizes festivals, seminars and competitions to promote dance, music and theatre. Many invite the participation of representatives from the 27 provinces and have themes that are aimed at enhancing national unity and cultural identity.

Indonesians have, since the time of their struggle for independence, accepted Bahasa Indonesia (the national language) as a unifying

force. Thus whether plays written in the conventional approach using the proscenium stage, such as those of Usmar Ismail, Teguh Karya, Suyatna Anirun or N. Riantiarno, or plays which combine new idiomatic expressions with traditional theatre elements exemplified by works of Arifin Noer or W. S. Rendra, or those experimental plays of Putu Widjaya and Ikranagara, all performed and published in Bahasa Indonesia.

For a country that is so vast in geographical area and with so long a cultural history, Indonesia is not as vulnerable to the wave of cultural globalization. New music or new choreography created by Indonesian artists, regardless of their years of affiliation with or training in western institutions, always clearly demonstrate the distinctive indigenous cultural elements. Is the Indonesianess in the arts a result of deep cultural roots? Or the artistes' strong sense of cultural identity? If one examines large numbers of new works of dance and music created by the young choreographers and composers, one can easily detect this trend: they are innovative in creating new motifs, using new physical materials yet retaining the indigenous and traditional aesthetic principles of their art forms. Their liberal use of traditional elements in new combination or innovations of new motifs do not violate their cultural rules.

However, one must note that because of the vastness of the country and its cultural and religious diversity, most Indonesians actually are still products of a plural culture. The national





*New dance created by Thai choreographer  
Naraphong Charassri for the 1st ASEAN Dance  
Festival held in Jakarta in 1990*

culture links with the usage of Bahasa Indonesia and the local dialect or language identify with local community. This dualism has indeed enriched their artistic imagination, perceptions and productions.

In multi-cultural, multi-language Malaysia and Singapore, issues of language, culture and identity are far more complicated. In Malaysia, national identity or nationalism are interpreted differently by different ethnic groups. The Malays, consisting of almost 60% of the total population saw themselves as the indigenous people, the bumiputras. Malay, since Malaysia became independent from the British in 1957, was proclaimed the national language and is naturally the official language of government, law and education. Malay is therefore the tool for the development of national culture. They consider their ideas of national identity very bounded to culture.

Malay traditional performing arts unfortunately are not enjoying as much media attention and financial support from the government as the contemporary Malay theatre and literature. Although the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism has various projects assisting traditional performing artistes, traditional Malay art forms are on the decline. This partly is due to the national religion, Islam, as the orthodoxy regard all performing arts as "haram", things that are not permitted under Islam for fear of corruption of the mind. All Malay traditional music, drama and dance have invocations which are derived from pre-Islamic systems of belief such as Buddhism,

Hinduism and primitive animism. The elements are seen as anti-Islamic, therefore not to be tolerated. Even in the rural areas where these forms flourished, audiences are shrinking, partly because of the low quality of performance presented by the poorly paid artistes and partly due to the influence exerted by the religious leaders or institutions to limit the size of audiences.

The government is reported to have responded to the call of academic circles and will soon set up a National Academy, headed by Dr. Mohd Anis Md Nor, to ensure the transmission of knowledge of the traditional performing arts. It remains to be seen whether or not these traditional performing arts can survive the pressures of strong religious groups and the alienation of the social environment where they originally came from.

More promising is the contemporary Malay theatre where official support is much more visible and practitioners are larger in number. In the 1950s Malay contemporary theatre was characterized by a preoccupation with nationalism and nationhood. Many Sandiwara performances captured the attention of the masses. By the time Malaysia was formed in 1963, local plays written specifically for Malay high schools proliferated, in the style of western realism. Then came the 1969 riots where serious ethnic conflict erupted which caused extensive loss of lives. Malay dramatists then began a long period of experimentation in search of an answer after the shock.

Many more plays have been written,

produced and published since then. Some notable dramatists, such as Nordin Hassam, Johan Jaafar and Mustapha Kamil Yassin have produced several popular works. Some make explicit political statements in their plays while others are concerned with the confrontation of traditional and modern values. But one must note that despite years of government efforts, Malay theatre still appeals to mainly a Malay audience. Similarly, Chinese and Indian theatre are very much confined to their respective communities, as attending these drama performances is an expression of conforming to their cultural identity.

The government does not give financial assistance to non-Malay cultural activities as they are excluded in what is perceived as national culture, the Malay culture. The Chinese and Indian communities therefore have to find their own financial resources to patronize performing arts, traditional or contemporary theatre. For example, the Chinese community has for the last 12 years organized a national dance competition which has now become an effective symbolic communication system that helps to consolidate ethnicity and culture. The Indian Temple of Fine Arts' dance and music classes, as well as concerts have a similar strong appeal to the members of the Indian communities. These phenomena again confirm the close relationship between cultural identity and the performing arts.

Although more than three quarters of its population is Chinese, the Singapore government policy is to

give equal official support to all languages and ethnic groups. Thus it has programmes in four languages on daily television and radio and the 'mother tongue' of each of the main ethnic groups, the Chinese, the Indian and the Malay, are taught in school as a 'second' language, while English is the language of instruction. It is believed that English, inherited from the British colonial history, is *de facto* the common language among the different ethnic groups and that it would help to promote unity.

Singapore has been fairly successful in its effort to promote racial harmony. Emphasis on multiculturalism is evident in the National Day celebrations, Chinese New Year parades and all government funded activities. Typical cultural shows incorporate Indian, Malay and Chinese dance and music items with equal ratio. Even public holidays to commemorate their religious festival and new year celebrations are equally divided among the ethnic groups.

Eager to display ethnic unity and a Singaporean identity, some dramatists

use all four languages in the drama, but to date, fail to gain artistic credit compared to the better attempts in mixing dances of different ethnic groups made by choreographers.

To understand the drama, dance and music of Singapore, one must trace the history of this immigrant society of less than 180 years old and understand the usage of performing arts in anti-colonial campaigns, and in political competition between the ruling government party and its opposition and in forging national unity. It is doubtful that performing arts, similar to literature, can be totally cut off from the cultural roots and emotional importance of the three major ethnic groups. More likely to continue is a rich multiethnic performing arts scene which permits the artistes to practice their chosen forms and ideology. Whatever they want to express or experiment, they will have to operate within the complex multi-lingual and multi-cultural context.

Cultural identity defines the sense of nation, community and roots. In the Southeast Asian context, cultural identity as reflected in the performing

arts is often linked to the politics of nationalism, national integration and political context. Despite the extent of westernization and urbanization and the trend of globalization, it is unlikely that Southeast Asia will absorb western culture wholesale. With their economic success comes cultural confidence; Southeast Asians are now more assertive in their thinking, whether in the arts or politics. Such a trend is exemplified by the views expressed by ASEAN leaders such as Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, that Southeast Asia does not necessarily need to follow the model of democracy of the west as social cultural conditions here are different from those in Europe and America. In the meeting held in Manila at the end of October 1992, the ASEAN foreign ministers have once again told their European community counterparts that ASEAN has its own political model evolved from its course of social political development. Performing arts in Southeast Asia, is therefore likely to retain distinctive characteristics with its diverse ethnic and cultural heritages in the changing world.