

# The Development of Costumes for Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces of Thailand

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## Abstract

The Thai-Muslim folk performance arts of Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu are important and valuable parts of local and national heritage but are struggling to exist in modern society. These performance arts are vital for the continuation of traditions and customs, yet cannot satisfy the entertainment needs of audiences. This research studies the conditions of folk art performances by Thai-Muslims in three southern border provinces of Thailand in order to develop the costumes used in the shows and provide a solution to the battle against modern forms of entertainment. The results identify both changes and stagnation in costume type, character, size, shade, patterns, and materials as causing a decline of traditional performance popularity. A combination of tradition and development, modern costumes should be directly related to the needs of current society and implemented by artists, governments and private institutions to conserve these three performance arts in southern Thailand.

**Keywords:** development, folk performance art, costumes, Thai-Muslim, Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng, Dikir Hulu

## 1. Introduction

Performance art is important to human life and dance itself has been a part of national culture since ancestral communities first found their rhythm. There are differences in the styles of performance art from place to place and community to community, which have been adopted and refined according to national popularity. Dancing is the continuous movement of the body that has a precise rhythm in a limited area. It also means emotional expression that releases excessive energy or provides entertainment. Dancing is natural expression from humans to show contentment and emotion and performs roles of communication in each community. Thai national dances have been developed throughout the course of social history. Considered valuable and honest cultural manifestations of human emotion, Thai dances have been accepted in concept and conserved for future generations. Dancing is therefore regarded as a precise aspect of Thai cultural identity (Wirulrak, 2004, pp. 331-332).

Folk performances are shows that occur in provincial communities in Thailand, reflecting the local culture and boasting different elements of beauty and entertainment. The objectives of folk performance art reflect the social conditions in each local area, as does the style of the art, which differs by area. These dancing arts and music do not only have a role in reflecting social values but are also influenced by the four main factors of humanity: food, accommodation, clothing and medicine. People should have a sustained and stable mentality in order to build and express aesthetic emotions. Moreover, dancing could hold education benefits by developing the quality of students. Dancing arts require perfection in their components, such as fine choreography, good music, strong story, beautiful costumes, background, stage, lighting and sound effects. Combined, these elements create the performance atmosphere (Boonyasing & Satavetin, 1979, p. 248).

The role of costume is personal expression of the character and shows the status, culture, period and also position and title of the actors. It also compliments the delicate movement, which is the most important part of dancing. Nowadays, increased emphasis on costumes is not only found in Thai dancing, but also in Thai-Muslim dances of the three southern border provinces of Thailand. In these provinces, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, the dancing arts are different to those in other regions. This is primarily because people in these areas are descended from the Malayu race and adopt Islamic principles with a different culture to the majority of the Thai population.

Folk performance arts of Thai-Muslims in the three southern border provinces are performance arts that have existed since their creation by ancestral communities. Malayu identity indicates their existence within past society and transmission to the present time. There are three types of performance, which are Mak yong (a drama), Rong-Ngeng (dancing arts) and Dikir Hulu (interactive singing and dancing performance). The costumes have three main components, which are clothing, body accessories and head accessories.

Thai-Muslim lifestyles in the three southern border provinces have developed and progressed from past traditions. Some of these traditions still exist and show a stable history of the race. However, some traditions have changed according to lifestyle and environment. Likewise, the costumes of performance arts in the area are different from the originals in their designs, materials, colors, sizes and patterns.

At present, Mak yong, Rong Ngeng and Dikir Hulu performances of Thai-Muslims are increasingly rare. The popularity of these performance arts is waning. The main reasons for this decline are the lack of descendants and the development of technology and communication networks that spread different forms of entertainment to the region and change social conditions. Folk dancing arts have gradually faded from the past and, as a result, there has been no development in character and types of performance. This has led to dull and predictable performances. Moreover, the costumes are not fashionable and up-to-date due to a lack of knowledge and understanding in design. For these reasons, the authors realized that the development of costumes for performance arts in the three southern border provinces of Thailand could imitate materials from the past, such as diamonds, jewelry, rubies and gold, while remaining proper, beautiful and interesting. The authors thus conducted this research to identify concepts for developing costumes in folk dancing arts in the three southern border provinces. The costumes must be standardized, beautiful, elegant and interesting and there must be role-based differences. The costumes must be developed and restored to be current whilst retaining the traditional culture and art. Ultimately, these changes will help to ensure continuation of the traditional wisdom of Thai-Malayu identity to the next generation.

## **2. Research Aims**

This research had three main objectives: a) to study the history, background, components, identity and belief in three folk performance arts of Thai-Muslim society in three southern border provinces of Thailand; b) to study the current problems with and needs of folk art costumes in three folk performance arts of Thai-Muslim society in three southern border provinces of Thailand; c) to develop costumes for folk performances arts of Thai-Muslim society in three southern border provinces of Thailand.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative research that was conducted through documentary study and field study. The research area is the area in which Thai-Muslim performance arts still exist in three southern border provinces of Thailand. These provinces are Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The selection was completed after initial data tests found that these three provinces contained the most Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu shows. This study used a purposive sampling method to identify participants. The sample group was comprised of thirty key informants (band leaders, philosophers, academics and cultural committee members), forty-eight casual informants (tailors, accessory makers and souvenir makers) and forty-two general informants (employers, musicians, performers and other people). A total of nine bands were used in this study. The research tools were basic survey, structured interview, in-depth interview, participant and non-participant observation, focus group discussion and workshop. The data was examined and analyzed by investigator triangulation, reusing reviews of the informants. Precise data was examined by methodological triangulation. The results were presented as a descriptive analysis.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 History, Background, Belief and Identity in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

Research in the communities found that the major Thai-Muslim performance arts in the three provinces are Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu. Mak yong performance is a story performed as a musical drama. Rong-Ngeng is primarily interaction between male and female Malayu people that was influenced by cultures from Portugal and The Netherlands. Dikir Hulu is a dialogue performed by conversation or singing in groups or bands and dancing along to a rhythm while clapping hands. All of these performances adhere to general Islamic doctrine. The performances of Mak yong and Rong-Ngeng have all but died out, visible only for ceremonial purposes at local cultural fairs. Dikir Hulu, although increasingly rare, is a performance purely for entertainment, performed in the evenings in local communities. While the costumes and the behavior have changed over time, they have never had a large role in the three folk performances. Thai-Muslim people in the three southern

provinces still respect and conserve their own folk arts, especially the traditional Dikir Hulu that is widely famous and accepted in Thai-Muslim society.

#### *4.2 Problems with and Needs in the Development of Costumes in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

Results from the survey and questionnaire were used to identify a number of problems with the costumes of the three shows. The results of the basic survey and questionnaire showed that the informants considered costume creation methods to be outdated. Previously, head dresses were made from cloth but are currently made from gold, silver and jewels. While the change of material is a positive, the styles have remained the same and do not compliment the new materials. The costumes for the performances in the three provinces were previously cut in many different styles but now only a few are used because the materials are difficult to find. This means the designs have become very similar and the shows are difficult to distinguish. Additionally, genuine jewelry was previously used to accessorize the plays but, due to price, replicas and imitations are now used, cheapening the performance in the eyes of the informants.

In Mak yong, the problems are the lack of a form of development for shows and costumes, the changing personal tastes of viewers, social changes, lack of knowledge of the tailors, insufficient budget and, finally, weakened belief in Islamic doctrine.

In Rong-Ngeng, there are four problems. These are the understanding of religion, the developmental form of up-to-date costumes, the tastes of viewers and support from government and related organizations.

In Dikir Hulu performance, there are two main problems, which are the understanding of Islamic doctrine and the knowledge of costume makers.

#### *4.3 The Development of Costumes in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

The main factor that improves the development of patterns and making costumes in performances of Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu is the quality of materials. This is also the factor that changes the costumes, body and head accessories. If the materials are changed, the form of costumes also changes. This is the reason why modern patterns on the costumes are different from original patterns.

Material is one area of development for Thai-Muslim folk performance costumes. Current material application is different from the past, although several older styles still remain. For example, in the past real jewelry pieces were used as accessories because of the royal connection to Malayu arts. Now, imitations are used with lower prices, which have a similar shape and shade to the original gems. The reason for the change was the cost of materials. Due to increasing expenses, lower priced accessories were selected as substitutes. However, there has been an obvious lack of development, seen in the very close, in some cases identical, relationship between costumes of Mak yong and Dikir Hulu.

Sizes and proportion have changed in a drive to modernize the costume styles, adhering to current conceptions of beauty. One such alteration is the decrease of female clothing proportions to be more shapely, attractive and fashionable. The people initiating these changes are the three groups of tailors: clothes designers, body accessory makers and head accessory makers. In conclusion, the main factors in development of the costumes are the changing concepts and wisdom of the makers, as influenced by their own social conditions.

## **5. Discussion**

### *5.1 History, Background, Composition, Belief and Identity in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

Thai-Malayu culture and art in the three southern border provinces of Thailand have an outstanding identity in music, lyrics, language, choreography and costumes which truly reflects Malayu identity. The results are consistent with the theory of identification-relation of William James, which concluded that people who apply their identity for understanding through their experiences can realize truth, even if they are disconnected from a situation (James, 1896). Moreover, the concept follows the lines of a study by Songkoon Chantachon (2010), which stated that humans must react to external influences based on their meaning. These influences should be considered at first-hand and their meaning perceived through social interaction. This theory implied that there is a relationship between social symbolization and social identity in all physical objects, social objects and abstract objects, such as cultures, belief, tradition, lifestyles, and costumes.

Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu performances by Thai-Muslims apply similar systems by teaching from one generation to the next. This follows the theory of functionalism (Malinowski, 1922), which theorized that acceptance or behavioral modification of people in society requires important factors in any period, such as

belief in individual potency within social and environmental development and open-mindedness towards new experiences. The aims of present and future success, realization of value, planning and creative freedoms could help in this development.

Mak yong performances include adaptation of Rong-Ngeng dancing styles with an interval to satisfy the viewers who admire the western dance patterns in Rong-Ngeng, which was influenced by Portuguese colonization. In Dikir Hulu, Thai country music in the Thai language is used with the objective of responding to popular Thai communication. For these reasons, Thai-Muslim performances existed and spread to present cultures. It is important to satisfy the needs of audiences under many conditions and factors, while respecting religious regulations. With this in mind, the performances will enjoy a good response from the Thai-Muslim people and not contradict the original traditions, religion, lifestyle and community.

### *5.2 Problems with and Needs in the Development of Costumes in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

Thai Muslim societies with Malayu inhabitants in the three southern border provinces of Thailand have changed and now accept external cultural influences. Western culture is particularly prevalent and has seen the introduction of new forms of entertainment, for example films, video games, television, radio, and the internet. This modernization has brought more conveniences that drive the changes. The people and community receive new and innovative developments that help shape ideals related to personality, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and the value of individual people or social groups. As a result, Mak yong performances have been neglected and their present format is stagnant. Moreover, the costumes are expensive and difficult to find because of a lack of popularity. There is also not enough variety in Mak yong performances, which instills boredom in the viewers and causes unattractive shows and no adaptation into each era. For these reasons, performances have no direction of adaptation to the needs of audiences, leading to decreased popularity.

As these performances are related to folk myth and the dancers dress in royal style, the tailors must imitate the clothing. However, they fail to understand the true concept of the designs, which is important for the viewers to notice or distinguish the characters during performances. Nowadays, Mak yong performers usually wear casual dress with a breast cloth (sabai) or small accessories, reducing the level of viewing entertainment. Therefore, the tailors should be supported to understand the correct patterns of costumes from Malayu royalty. If this support is provided, the tailors may be able to produce their own fine, beautiful and elegant designs from their accumulation of experience. This may in turn lead to individual identities of each society and could show-off the local historical culture.

### *5.3 The Development of Costumes in Thai-Muslim Folk Performance Arts in Three Southern Border Provinces*

Folk costumes should be developed in all areas: clothing, body and head accessories in both traditional and applied styles. They must be made more attractive and up-to-date according to the aesthetics theory (Uppathumarakorn, 2009). Aesthetic culture is the study of attraction form mental vision or objective vision. So, in the development of folk costumes in Thai-Muslim performances, aesthetics must be improved in line with this theory. Artists in the three southern border provinces mostly respect Islam, which regulates female clothing. The costumes should be improved as a method of conservation but must remain respectful according to Islamic principles and Malayu identity. It is necessary to provide training courses or education in costume design for Mak yong, Rong-Ngeng and Dikir Hulu. In each province and provincial cultural council, handbooks with full contents of clothes and accessories must be provided.

The concept of development in Mak yong, Rong Ngeng and Dikir Hulu should be modernized and could apply new trends in all patterns, materials, sizes and shades. Traditional and improved styles should be combined to create suitable, attractive, durable and reusable costumes. Moreover, they should be as attractive as the original materials used in the past, fit for the story or show and suitable for each occasion. With these changes and sufficient local awareness, Thai-Muslim folk art performances will be conserved for future generations.

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