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Communicating with Spirits: Bridging the Nether World of Spirits and the Real World in Healing Performances

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***Abstract*—**Traditional Malay performances are carried out for both entertainment and curing purposes. In curing rituals, the men and women serving as shamans, communicates with the spirits and beings from the nether world to facilitate the curing process. The dependency on engaging with these other-worldly beings however, have raised religious issues of being *syirik*, namely practicing in rituals which are religiously forbidden. This study aims to observe how ritual leaders attempt to negotiate the fine balance between what has been religiously forbidden and the psychological and sociological needs of the patient. Two curing rituals, the *main peteri* and the *malibobou* were chosen to exemplify the communication between the physical and spiritual realities. In both rituals, the healers engaged in procedures of curing as they attempted to diagnose sicknesses and proffer cures with the help of the spirits. The *main peteri* was conducted by a male shaman, the *tuk teri* whereas the *malibobou* was conducted by a female ritual specialist, the *bobohizan*. *Main peteri* and the *malibobou* both ended with ritually thanking and sending off the spirits back to their nether, invisible domains. These curing rituals heal not only the sick individual, but by extension, the village community. Therefore, there is a need to reconcile these rituals with religious tenets, beliefs and sociological-political-cultural dimensions.

***Keywords*—**Traditional healing, trance, spirits, *main peteri, bobohizan.*

I. Introduction: Rituals and Malay Healing Performances

IN the world of ritual performances, the *bomohs/shamans,* both male and female, must traverse the empirical world and establish contact with the spiritual beings of the other world so as to facilitate and enable healing procedures to be carried out. It traces the phenomena of how real, human beings in the physical world call upon beings from the invisible, nether worlds to descend to the real world and participate in the curing of sick people.

Malaysia has a wide variety of healing theatre rituals which testify to the animistic practices still prevalent in a country whose official religion is Islam. The two healing theatre rituals of *main peteri* and the *malibobou,* exemplify how the *tuk teri* and the *bobolian* communicate with the spirits from the nether worlds. This paper traces the communications involved between the practitioners of healing rituals as they traverse the real, every day, physical world and the nether world of the spirits. The presence of the nether world which is unseen but nevertheless felt and spiritually present, is determined by two important rituals at the beginning and at the end of these curing rituals. These rituals are the (a) *buka panggung*/opening the stage and (b) "*tutup panggung*"/closing the stage. These two rituals set the stage for communicating with the spirits from the nether worlds. Opening the stage is done primarily to inform, invite and persuade the ancestral spirits (*nenek moyang*) to come down, bless and participate in the chosen healing ritual. These opening and closing rituals are also to ascertain that the performers and the audiences are well protected, and that they would not be maligned by the spirits or by other rival, performing groups.

Just as the stage is ritually opened, the stage must also be ritually closed. The ancestral spirits and invisible beings must be thanked and sent off to their abodes with recitation of special mantras. In healing rituals, special receptacles made from woven *pandan* or coconut leaves or boats carved from banana trunks laden with food are prepared, then wrapped and buried or are carefully floated down water-ways to signify the "burial" or to discard the malevolent or evil spirits that have affected and disturbed the sick [1].

Failure to do the *tutup panggung* ritual would mean that the ancestral spirits have not been sent home, have not been appeased and as such they would continue to taunt, haunt, inhabit the earth or the bodies of the performer(s) or some "chosen" members of the audience and in the process make them ill, uncomfortable, unbalanced or cause havoc to them.

II. Communicating with the Spirits

The *tuk teri* in *main peteri* and the *bobohizan* in the *malibobou* rituals communicate with spirits from the nether worlds to cure sick, unwell or persons who feel "unbalanced" in the real, physical world. The main avenue for such communications is through a trance, namely getting into a heightened and altered state of awareness whereby the *tuk teri* and the *bobohizan* enter into a different dimension through a trance state. They become *lupa*, namely they forget who they are and they morph into different spirits/beings who are eager or are coerced to communicate with the shamans or their helpers.

Sometimes, it is not only the performers but also members of the audience who enter into a trance to experience these altered,

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heightened states of consciousness. It is believed that these audiences are *lemah semangat*/spiritually weak, hence are easily influenced and/or are disturbed by spirits, malevolent or otherwise [2]. They also easily become ill and succumb to the demands of the spirits. They *rebah*/fall or enter into a state of trance. Trance is the medium which enables the invisible beings to communicate their demands and misgivings through the shaman, in the form of the *tuk teri* or the *bobohizan.*

III. The Healing Theatres of Main Peteri and the Malibobou Ritual

Main Peteri, a curing ritual, involves the medicine man, known as the *tuk teri*, his helper, known as the *tuk minduk* and the sick person who is in need of being cured, or being realigned, re-balanced and made well again.

The *tuk teri* is the most important person in the *main peteri* theatre performance. He is the *bomoh*, the medicine man who is responsible for conducting and determining the course of the performance. He initiates the performance by conducting the ritual of *buka panggung* invoking on ancestral spirits, souls, and others to come down, to bless and participate in the performance and to enter his body so as to enable him to cure the patient. Once the spirits enter the patient's body, he will get into a trance. Consequently, the *tuk teri* goes in and comes out of trance several times as the different spirits enter and exit his body which they have made into their temporary abode.

The *tuk teri's* physical body thus becomes the physical receptacle for the spirits. The presence of these nether beings in the body of the *tuk teri* is signified by the *tuk teri's* trance state. His altered and heightened state of awareness is communicated to the observors/audience by the changes in his voice, the different ways he talks or communicates, the different songs he sings and the requests he makes which must be fulfilled. These requests are the demands made by the spirits who are speaking through the *tuk teri*. An example of such requests include asking for milk to drink or artefacts that must be found in order to appease them. The audience knows that these are demands made by the invisible beings who are now communicating their wants through the *tuk teri,* who has now ceased to be the *tuk teri*, but has instead become the physical receptacle for the spirits with whom he has communicated and which he has summoned to come down. This strange phenomenon must be deciphered or interpreted by the *tuk minduk,* the *tuk teri's* assistant. Hence, metamorphosis happens; the *tuk teri* becomes the spirit(s) and they speak, make their needs known and make demands through him. These are understood only by the *tuk minduk* who then communicates to the audience what the spirits have demanded. It is the *tuk minduk* who then helps the *tuk teri* to communicate with these spirits in order to find the appropriate cure for the patient.

Once the spirits communicate their grievances and make their demands known, followed by the spirits being recognized and identified, a negotiating process follows. The *tuk minduk* explains to the spirit(s) inherent in the *tuk teri's* body, why they must leave and cease to disturb the sick, weakened man. This process of chasing the spirits away is communicated verbally by the *tuk minduk.* Sometimes it is easy to persuade the spirit(s) to leave but occasionally there are stubborn, angry or mischievous spirits who simply refused to leave. These spirits must be persuaded, bribed, threatened or frightened into submission. Eventually these spirits will leave, especially if the *tuk teri* is a renowned medicine man, who also has a host of his own invisible beings helping him. These spirits belong to him for he has taken good care of them. He feeds them and sustains them through various rituals. The *tuk teri* never hesitates to call upon his own, invisible helpers, for these spirits are at his beck and call. As such, the spirits aid the *tuk teri* in confronting the evil, "other" invisible beings/spirits disturbing the sick person who at the same time, is challenging the authority and supremacy of the *tuk teri.* All these are communicated to the malevolent spirits through fast, frenzied movements as the *tuk teri,* in a heightened state of trance, engages in verbal repartee with the *tuk minduk* [3]. At this juncture, the whole scene is aided not only by the frenzied, trance movements exemplified by the heightened states of altered awareness of the *tuk teri*, but also by the musicians as they furiously beat the drums and the gongs resulting in a fast paced music which ultimately reaches a climatic crescendo.

The malevolent spirits eventually are defeated and their leave taking is physically seen when the *tuk teri* strikes the patient with the *rotan berai* (a bunch of cane tied together) or when he mimes the action of pulling something out through the patient's head or when he is seen sucking something from the patient's toe. The *tuk minduk* and the *tuk teri* are in fact "role playing" with the former acting as interrogator and the latter as the personification of the spirit(s) disturbing the patient. Together they combine their skills and communicate with the spirits to help find a cure to heal the sick man. As such, they are able to identify the causes for the patient's sickness. They then have to manage to fulfill the demands made by the malevolent spirits and in the process appease them. Thus, the evil spirits inhabiting the body of the sick person are then 'expelled'. The *tuk teri* and the *tuk minduk* are able to succeed in the expulsion because they have been able to communicate with one another and with the different spirits, through their ever changing roles and dimensions.

The *tok minduk,* as interpreter, must always be aware, decipher and react to the many changes manifested in the *tuk teri*. This is to enable the *tok minduk* to make the necessary connections so that the spirits and the *bomoh* can communicate and understand each other accordingly. Likewise, the audience must be alert and be able to read the *bomoh's* many "ventriloquial" changes as he engages in "dialoguing" with the invisible beings and communicating their demands to the t*uk minduk,* the *tuk teri's* helper turned mediator-negotiator. These invisible spirits have all been transformed and accepted as participants in the curing/healing ritual. The assumption made is that the *bomoh*/healer is able to feel and see them, but the rest of those attending the healing ritual cannot, although they are aware that the spirits are present and are communicating with and through the *bomoh*. On the other hand, the *malibobou* ritual attended in this study, differed from the complicated means of communicating with the spirits and the everyday world manifested in the *main peteri* ritual by being a rather simple

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procedure. In the *main peteri* ritual, there is accompaniment by a whole Malay music ensemble, mantras, artefacts and the interplay of communicating amongst the *tuk teri,* his helper, the *tuk minduk* and the spirits. In contrast, in the *malibobou* ritual, the artefacts are simple with the offerings comprising an egg, a knife, a lime, a piece of yellow cloth and the usual puffed riced. However, there do exist more complicated *malibobou* rituals than the one observed in this study. The simplified *malibobou* ritual observed had no musical accompaniments except for the ancestral *komborongoh* and was chosen only to show the communications involved between the *bobohizan* by the name of Odun Linjunan, and the spirits called the *jimbarans.*

IV. Becoming a Bobohizan: Odun Linjunan

It is believed that the first *bobolian* came into being because of the existence of diseases in this world which could only be cured through the intervention of an intermediary known as the *bobohizan*. The *bobohizan* is chosen through a dream process and she is taught how to summon, recite the *renaits* (verses which function as healing *manteras*), bribe, cajole or threaten the spirits disturbing the sick individual. In Odun Linjunan's case, she was initially reluctant to become a *bobohizan*, despite her mother being the renowned *bobohizan* Odun Rinungan.

Before Odun Linjunan became a *bobohizan*, she almost became a mad woman, her life was topsy turvy with her sense of balance and equilibrium gone. She wondered what was happening to her, but she also knew that she was the chosen one to carry on her late mother's job of being a *bobohizan*. The *saka* (the ancient spirit, the spiritual geist) that was embedded within her manifested its demands that she become the intermediary between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits. She was chosen to intercede, diagnose, find cures for those who have fallen ill and are in need of her help and intervention. The *jimbarans*/spirits penetrated her body, despite no longer being a pagan and instead embracing the Islamic religion [4].

The healing ritual carried out by her in this study was to find out what had been troubling her son, Moses, who complained that his right arm had been troubling him for more than a month and hence was in pain. He could not help but compare it to his left arm which, although had been dislocated, was healed, and no longer giving him any pain. He went to the hospital to treat his right arm, but the pain did not subside. He knew that modern medicine as prescribed by the hospital would not be able to cure him and so asked his mother to diagnose and heal him. He felt that there were invisible beings/spirits causing the pain in his right arm [5].

The *malibobou* ceremony carried out to heal Moses' arm was done in the front portion of Moses' house. Odun Linjunan sat on a mat, with a tray of offerings in front of her. Odun Linjunan suddenly started to shout, retched and spat into a spitoon. /a "funny", disconcerted look on her face was observed. She began to sing a song, interspersed with invocations to "Allah, *tuan* Allah" and and a "ya eh, ya eh" rhythmic recitations. It is believed that she was in a semi-trance state and was communicating with the *jimbaran*(s)/spirits. She informed us that the Raja/king [of the *jimbarans*?] had come into her. This was followed by a conversation between her and the spirits and she, now in her capacity as the *bobohizan*, was asking the *jimbaran* to look at the condition of the sick man. It must be pointed out that we could only hear Odun Linjunan's side of the conversation as she informed, and made requests to fulfill what the spirits wanted before the healing process could begin. She interchangeably played the two roles of healer and spirit: *jimbaran* and *tantagas*. As *jimbaran* she usually asked for the fermented drink, the *tuak* or the *bahar*, but in this ritual, because she had asked for it, we had brought her a bottle of stout. Throughout the whole ritual she chewed her betel nut and *sireh* leaves, a habit practiced in her daily life as evidenced by her teeth which were all stained red.

The first demand made by the spirits and communicated to her in her trance (tipsy?) state was for a knife. She also communicated the fact that the *jimbarans* were angry and had gone amok. She then broke into a sing-song session, and broke out laughing eerily to come back and inform the gathering that the *jimbarans* have communicated to her and that they wanted the following: chicken, a knife and the *bahar/tuak,* the fermented, intoxicating drink. She then spoke in a language, which we could not decipher, to then inform Moses that she needed a new knife and that the "*nenek*" (referring to the spirits), had demanded an egg. In response, she took an egg from the tray of offerings, broke it, threw away the white part and ate the raw yolk. She reminded Moses about the knife, and with finger in her mouth, mimed the action of smoking a cigarette as she asked Moses, whether he had a cigarette to give her; he had and so gave her one. Alone, in a seeming state of trance she would communicate the demands of the *jimbarans*, but at times, she would revert back to being herself. Interspersing her lamentations with invocations to Allah, uttering her misgivings, telling her own personal woes, speaking in a language which the researchers could not understand and breaking into English by saying "*orite, orite*" (all right, all right), she then communicated to Moses that the spirits also wanted needles [6]. All this time, she would be touching or holding and shaking the *kombrongoh*, the crucial, central instrument of any *bobolian* ritual, used to summon the spirits or to awaken the geist of the performer.

For slightly over an hour, she communicated by chanting, dialoguing with and making known the demands of the spirits in the process of healing Moses' arm. Odun Linjunan also drank almost a whole bottle of stout.

At the end of the ritual, she turned to face the wall. Dramatically, she waved goodbye, presumably to the *jimbarans* and to signal that the healing of Moses had been completed. She then turned to face the group of researchers and explained that the *jimbarans* had communicated to her the fact that they are greatly displeased for the patient had been stubborn and had ignored their demands which they told to him through dreams [7]. When these were ignored, they caused him the pain in his arm. Now the sick man had to also do the ritual of cleansing the area around his house.

V. Conclusion

Both the *main peteri* and the *malibobou* rituals show how the everyday, physical world and the invisible worlds of spirits and

jimbarans can be accessed through the communicating skills of the *tuk teri*, *tuk minduk* and the *bobohizan*. Aided by music and mantras (and in Odun Linjunan's case by a bottle of stout), these traditional healers, experience a heightened, altered state of awareness by going into a trance [8], find ways whereby they can communicate with the spirits, and the spirits, in turn can communicate with them, in an attempt to find cures to heal the sick. This dialoguing with the spirits, calling upon invisible beings to help find cures for the sick, invoking mantras, going into a trance are practices which go against the tenets of Islam. However, practitioners continue to negotiate these religious prohibitions, and will find ways to communicate with the invisible beings from the nether world. These rituals of healing continue to be practiced as part of the cultural tapestry of the Malaysian nation. As part of the modernizing process too, researchers will be able to use science and modern technology to determine the states of consciousness and bodily changes which occur when healers go into a trance, when the spirits descend into their bodies and when they start to dialogue and communicate with each other. This is the real communicating challenge which researchers must now resolve.

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