

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### **A *Mak Yong* Odyssey**

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‘A *Mak Yong* Odyssey’ exhibition by Dato’ Prof. Dr. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof was launched on 21 September 2015, 10:00 am, at the Piyadasa Gallery, Cultural Centre, University of Malaya. Organized and curated by Emelia Ong, a senior lecturer cum coordinator of the Visual Arts department, this exhibition acknowledged and celebrated a significant Malaysian performing art through the research and documentation of a local but internationally renowned scholar. *Mak Yong* is an ancient form of traditional Malay theatre active in the east coast Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terengganu as well as in Patani in Southern Thailand.

Currently, Adjunct Professor at the Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, who holds a degree in English from the University of Malaya and a Doctorate in Asian Theatre from the University of Hawaii, is a leading scholar and expert of Malay traditional theatre. His wide range of research interests include traditional theatre, folklore, literature, as well as aesthetics. He has also written widely about traditional Southeast Asian theatre genres, his most notable works being the *Dictionary of Traditional South-East Asian Theatre* (Oxford 1994) and *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Volume 8 Performing Arts* (Editions Didier Millet 1994). As a creative writer Ghulam has published poetry, short stories and drama.

Ghulam’s involvement with *Mak Yong* began with a casual attendance at a performance in Kuala Lumpur during a festival of Southeast Asian Theatre and Music in 1969. He says that it affected him in some indescribable way. But he did not think about it in any serious way, as he was not at all involved in theatre or in any Asian art form. He went on to write his doctoral dissertation on this genre of theatre at the University of Hawaii in 1976, following an experimental production of the play *Raja Tangkai Hati* (The Spell of a Giantess) at that university in 1974, and intensive field work in Kelantan in 1975. Ghulam was the first scholar ever to work on any genre of traditional Malay theatre. He played an important role in preparing and submitting the proposal to UNESCO that led to the recognition of *Mak Yong* as a ‘Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ in 2005.

In a lecture at the opening the *Mak Yong* Odyssey, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof traced his own involvement in *Mak Yong*, following the first performance he had witnessed, and his choice of *Mak Yong* as the topic for his dissertation. He acknowledged this may have been due to something others before him had called the “magic” of *Mak Yong*, without actually being able to put a finger on what that was. He believes that he may have uncovered this magic element, something “spiritual” that has kept him in uninterrupted connection with *Mak Yong* for the past forty years. Ghulam touched upon the unique and invaluable qualities that *Mak Yong* possesses

as an art form, the problems connected with its survival after World War II, and the urgent need to preserve it.

In addition to writing on and documentation of *Mak Yong* since 1975, Ghulam also prepared the detailed documents sent to UNESCO by the Malaysian government to achieve recognition and proclamation of *Mak Yong* as an ‘Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ in 2005. He pointed out that, despite this success, nothing has in fact been done on the ground to preserve that art form. To him this is a tragic situation given *Mak Yong*’s unique qualities as a theatre form. In the past ten years the decline has been serious with the last few expert performers gone. As Ghulam puts it in his monograph on *Mak Yong*:

“In the end all that is likely to remain is what the National Arts and Heritage Academy offers, a modernized student version, a pale shadow of a precious theatre form reaching back over a thousand years.” (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 2011, “*Mak Yong* Theatre of Kelantan, Malaysia: An Introduction”)

This exhibition, the first ever on Ghulam’s research work and on *Mak Yong* as an art form, included the following items

- A timeline of his research pinpointing important milestones in his journey with *Mak Yong*,
- The documents prepared for the application for *Mak Yong* to be recognized as an item of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005,
- Original photographs taken by him during fieldwork in 1975 for his PhD dissertation on *Mak Yong*,
- Dissertations and other publications on *Mak Yong* and many other related materials, written by him and by other local and international scholars,
- Audio-visual materials showcasing *Mak Yong* theatre in performance, including two documentaries produced by Ghulam,
- *Mak Yong* musical instruments, courtesy of the Cultural Centre, University of Malaya.

Other highlights of the exhibition included:

- Line illustrations done by Zakaria Ibrahim, in 1975, for Ghulam-Sarwar’s doctoral dissertation,
- Six paintings by Siti Zainon Ismail who had worked closely with Khatijah Awang, the famous *Mak Yong* performer. These paintings illustrate symbolic motifs of *Mak Yong* and capture some of its dance movements.

Overall it was a representative exhibition highlighting the importance of *Mak Yong* as well as giving a clear insight into the processes through which Ghulam went to document and study the genre during a year of full involvement in field work in Kelantan.

## **The Photographs**

The photographs on display during the exhibition were a selection of the large collection in Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's possession. They were all taken by him during fieldwork in Kelantan between February and November 1975. He worked with the few remaining groups and many individual *Mak Yong* practitioners, including veteran artists who had retired decades before his project. The three most important persons in Ghulam's research were Pak Hasan Jambi, Zainab Tunku Temenggong, and Abdullah Awang. Others included Khatijah Awang and Abdullah Daud, a well-known healer (*bomoh*).

The stunning photographs managed to capture the atmosphere of folk *Mak Yong* performed in the traditional rural context. They provided a panoramic view of the staging of *Mak Yong* both for entertainment as well as ritual purposes, in the traditional manner in which the genre had been presented over hundreds of years in rural Kelantan. Among the highlights of the exhibition were the photographs showing the initiation of Khatijah Awang into *Mak Yong*. To Ghulam this has remained the most amazing performance of any kind of theatre he has ever watched.

The other notable aspect of the exhibition was the manner in which Ghulam captured leading *Mak Yong* personalities in action, through them linking the past, reaching back to the years before World War II, with the situation prevailing in 1975. The photographs of Zainab Tunku Temenggong (photo below), Abdullah bin Awang and Fatimah Hussein Keronchong show pre-war artists in action. They were brought from "retirement" by Ghulam himself to demonstrate the traditional manner of *Mak Yong* presentation, as well as to be part of Khatijah Awang's initiation in which she paid homage (*sembah guru*) to them and officially became their successor in *Mak Yong*, taking on the responsibility of sustaining this important genre of theatre into the 1970's and beyond. They capture the essence of *Mak Yong* both as folk theatre as well as ritual.

Overall, apart from the undoubtedly nostalgic sense created by Ghulam's highly sensitive photography, the exhibition represents an invaluable insight into traditional *Mak Yong*, its history as well as its manner of performance that is no longer available to today's audiences.



Mak Nab Raja, the wife of Tengku Temenggong Abdul Ghaffar, who initiated the attempt to establish a court *Mak Yong* in the 1930's, demonstrating dance movements.

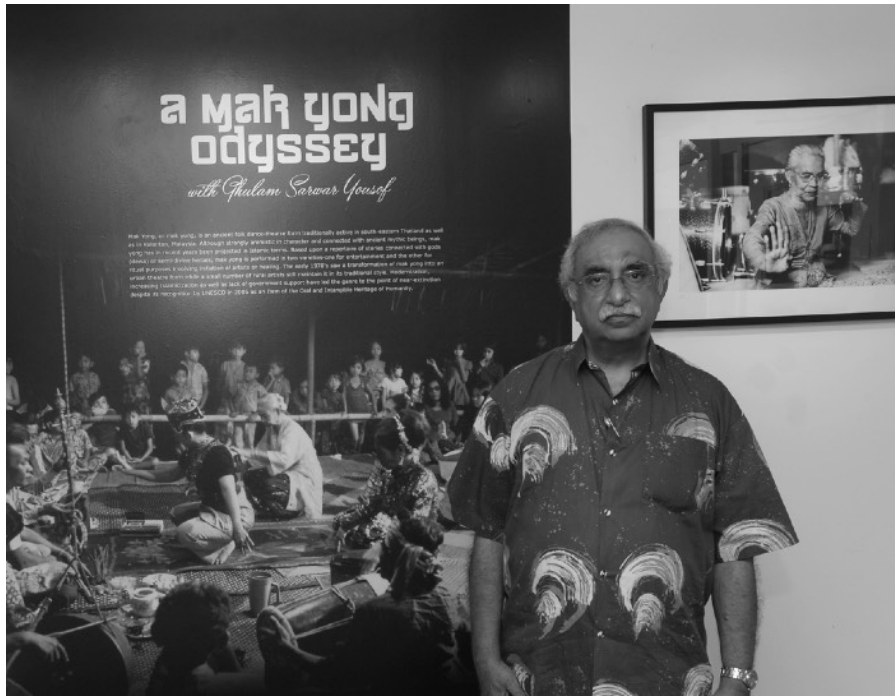
For visitors to the exhibition not previously exposed to *Mak Yong*, the exhibition was a truly enlightening and sensational experience. Wall stickers containing information regarding *Mak Yong* surrounded the gallery. The nostalgic black-and-white photographs, breathtakingly captivating and stimulating, and the line sketches done by a Kelantan artist were stunning, to say the least. Although several of the photographs displayed seemed to be somewhat faded due to the passage of time, they nevertheless captured timeless and precious moments in *Mak Yong* history. Yet, the exhibition could have had a greater impact visually had it been held in a more spacious setting with a larger selection of Ghulam's photographs.



Khatijah Awang, a famous *Mak Yong* performer in a graceful pose.



General view of a *Mak Yong* performance led by the Pak Yong, male lead role played by Khatijah Awang (first actor/dancer facing the musicians).



Prof. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof at his first *Mak Yong* exhibition entitled 'A *Mak Yong* Odyssey', at the Piyadasa Gallery, Cultural Centre, University of Malaya.



'A *Mak Yong* Odyssey' Exhibition, showcasing an assortment of photographic and visual materials of Prof. Ghulam's doctoral research on *Mak Yong* at the Piyadasa Gallery, Cultural Centre, University of Malaya.



Attendees of the *Mak Yong* Exhibition comprising mostly *Mak Yong* enthusiasts, researchers and students from various educational institutions.

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