

# An exploratory study on the challenges in preserving Mak Yong in the East Coast of Malaysia

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## Abstract

The decline of intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia, particularly Mak Yong, a traditional Malay performing art, has not been widely discussed and has spawned much speculation regarding the main cause of such decline. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to explore the challenges in preserving the Mak Yong cultural tradition in its original cultural space (the East Coast of Malaysia). This study applied the semi-structured interview method to gain insights from 14 informants who are either performers or closely involved with Mak Yong for several years. The interview data gathered are transcribed and analyzed using the thematic analysis. The finding for this study showed five causes for Mak Yong's deteriorate, with religion rank as the main factor, followed by, political ideology, lack of expertise and experience, modernisation, and finally, community. Among these, communities with Islamic beliefs tend to elect a political party that reflects their belief system. The strategies and actions of such political parties then hasten the decline of Mak Yong.

**Keywords:** *Mak Yong*, , religion, political ideology, community, globalisation,

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'cultural heritage tourism' encompasses traveling to a destination to experience authentic places, artefacts, peoples, and activities. Since Malaysia is rich in terms of both its history and cultural heritage, this has led to the introduction and marketing of a range of tourism cultural heritage products in order to attract cultural heritage travellers who tend to spend more money and stay longer at a destination than other types of traveller (National Trust, 2014). Among the forms of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that have become drivers of the tourism sector is Mak Yong, an ancient dance-drama performance with musical accompaniment that dates back to around the seventeenth-century period and was inspired by Hindu-Buddhist texts. Mak Yong was recognised as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO in 2015.

However, despite this designation, there is a pressing need both to preserve and revitalise this art form before it vanishes as a result of declining interest among the younger generation, small remuneration received by performers, the time length of duration to master the intricacies of the dances (Ariffin, 2015) and politic intervention (Khan and Abdul Aziz, 2018 ;You and Hardwick, 2020). As mentioned by cultural activist Yati Kaprawi "Our tradition and culture is dying not because the young people do not love it, but it is because of the conservative religious people who keep banning any culture they deem as un-Islamic" (Malay Mail Online, 8 October 2017).

Previous studies pertaining to Mak Yong have adopted several angles of inquiry, such as problems associated with its definition (Hussein, Nor & Malek, 2011) and its characteristics (Mohamad, 2012), the effect of political

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agenda and contexts (Hoffstaedter, 2009; Hardwick, 2013) and the need for collaboration between tourism and cultural heritage management (2014), as well as community involvement and sustainability (Shuaib & Olalere, 2013). Yet, there remains a scarcity of research on the main challenges that need to be identified and addressed in order to ensure the preservation and continuance of Mak Yong in its original cultural space, i.e., the states of Kelantan and Terengganu on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the challenges in preserving Mak Yong in this setting and where the hold of religion-based political parties is particularly strong.

## 2. SAFEGUARDING AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The importance of safeguarding cultural heritage in Malaysia has been acknowledged since the 8th Malaysia Plan (2001–2005), which included the objective of enhancing national identity while strengthening national unity, harmony, and integration. Due to the unique mix of a diverse range of cultures and long-established multicultural society in Malaysia, the country has been able to develop a cultural heritage product, which has been promoted worldwide under the banner 'Malaysia Truly Asia' since year 2000. Furthermore, the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture, which was formed in 2004, has served as an organisation that consolidates policies and programmes that further promote Malaysia's culture, arts, and heritage, in addition to formulating new strategies to make the arts more accessible to the masses. Cultural heritage has also been promoted as a source of economic growth by the government at the national and state levels.

Moreover, in order to reinforce national heritage, the National Heritage Act (NHA) was passed in 2005 with the intention to offer protection to and preserve various tangible and intangible cultural assets. The NHA covers various aspects related to heritage, including natural heritage, tangible cultural heritage and ICH, underwater cultural heritage, and treasure trove, to name a few (Idrus, Khamidi, & Sodangi, 2010). However, despite the existence of the provision on ICH in the Act, Hussein, Noor and Manap (2011) found that the ICH category covers only oral transmission, and thus does not correspond to the notion of intangible heritage and folklore as defined by UNESCO. Specifically, Article 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage describes this type of heritage as:

*“...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups, and individuals, and of sustainable development.”*

[UNESCO, 2003]

Lenzerini (2011) has asserted that the reason that the NHA was drafted in such a way to pay more attention to oral tradition was that UNESCO placed more priority on language (e.g., oral tradition and literature) due to their importance in the process of safeguarding cultures, particularly among those minorities whose cultural heritage is at the greatest risk. Therefore, suitable methods for protecting ICH and folklore in the NHA need to be addressed and revised so as to successfully preserve the precious facets of cultural heritage.

Intangible culture has always been intertwined with the tangible, in which the tangible can only be explained through the intangible (Munjeri, 2004). Indeed, it has been asserted that both tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage are interdependent when it comes to an understanding the meaning and the significance of each (Pocock, Collett & Baulch, 2015; Wang, Huang & Kim, 2015;). In order to preserve both types of heritage, integrated documentation is required (Carboni & de Luca, 2016). Tangible cultural heritage can be classified into immovable resources (e.g., buildings, rivers, natural habitats), and movable resources (e.g., objects in museums, documents in archives) that can be easily catalogued (Timothy & Boyd, 2003), and their protection mainly involves the implementation of conservation and restoration measures. On the other hand, ICH is composed of practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that belong to communities and are held by specific members (UNESCO, 2003; Cominelli & Greffe, 2012; Liu, 2015), and thus demand a different safeguarding approach and methodology. As the survivability of an ICH relies on oral transmission from its creator to the next and subsequent generations, it is, therefore, more vulnerable and fragile than other forms of heritage (Stefano, Davis & Corsane, 2012, 2014).

Drawing on the approach taken to the preservation of tangible cultural heritage, Bouchenaki (2007) has suggested that safeguarding ICH should involve the translation of the oral form into a material manifestation, such as archives, inventories, and museum artefacts, as well as audio and film records. The Living National Treasure system developed in Japan is another safeguarding method, whereby tradition holders transfer their knowledge (skills and techniques) to future generations (UNESCO, 2011b). Nevertheless, this transference can only be achieved when there are a comprehensive preservation and promotion strategy in place to support such efforts. Without proper planning, any knowledge transfer by elders will ultimately be wasted.

This view on elderly knowledge transfer is supported by Techera (2011), who explored the laws and policies for the safeguarding of cultural heritage in Fiji in which it was revealed that the drawback of the knowledge transfer project that was being instituted by the Government of Fiji was that it was being performed on an ad hoc basis without proper strategic policy and planning, and that, in addition, there was a lack of educational programmes through which to convey the collected knowledge to the wider community, especially the younger generation.

Unlike Japan and Fiji, where knowledge transfer is primarily driven top-down through national government initiatives, research studies in other contexts have identified the importance of local community participation in decision making in respect of the heritage agenda, as compared to government domination, because there is greater understanding and appreciation of the value of ICH at the local rather than the national level. See, for example, the work of Hribar, Bole and Pipan (2015) in Slovenian and Scholtz and Slabbert (2016) in South Africa.

### 3. THE CHALLENGES IN PRESERVING MAK YONG IN EAST COAST MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, Mak Yong is a traditional Malay dramatic performance, which is believed to have been first performed in the state of Kelantan over 200 years ago. This performing art is believed to have its roots in animist and [Hindu-Buddhist traditions](#). Mak Yong incorporates elements of entertainment, shamanism, feasting the spirit (Yousof, 2004), dances, acting, vocal and instrumental music, songs, and stories (Yousof, 2017). This dance-drama is performed mainly by female troupes, who act both the male and female roles. The performers are accompanied by all-male musicians who play the *gong*, *serunai*, *rebab*, and elongated barrel drums (Zakaria, 1990). A Mak Yong cast can consist of eight to ten performers in the case of a ritual act, or as many as 20 to 25 if demanded by the level of complexity and story selection. This number excludes the accompanying musicians whose number is also dependent on the requirements of the specific performance (Zahari & Umar, 2011).

Mak Yong found fame as a performance given for royalty under the auspices of the Kelantan Sultanate from up until the year 1920s. The end of Mak Yong as a royal entertainment occurred during World War II (1939–1945), primarily due to the reduced financial circumstances of the Sultanate. Also, the death of the founder of Mak Yong, Tengku Temenggung Ghaffar, worsened the situation because his demise drove many of the performers away from the palace to perform independently. So that these performers could find work and an outlet for their artistic endeavours among the 'common people', Mak Yong was commercialised so as to cater to the demands of an audience who desired performances that were more relaxed, funny, and short in duration (one night instead of the usual duration of four to five nights). The changes that were made to the Mak Yong storyline to fit with this new era of Mak Yong contributed to the extinction of this authentic performance. It is also believed that commercialisation also contributed to a drop in moral values among its performers. This problematic image of the performers led to rejection among the wider community, which in turn led to a loss of interest in learning Mak Yong.

The decline of Mak Yong became even more apparent after the Parti Islam Semenanjung (PAS) came to power in Kelantan in when it gained the majority of seats in the state government in the year 1990. The PAS-led state governments in Kelantan banned Mak Yong on the grounds that this cultural tradition contained elements contrary to the Islamic creed, such as worshipping and ritual, and the free-mixing of men and women on a common stage. In relation to the banning of Mak Yong, the former, late Chief Minister of Kelantan, Datuk Nik Aziz (*Allahyarham*) asserted that "We need to purify our local theatre from those alien elements" (Prystay, 2006) by which referred to the stories and epics deriving from pre-Islamic content conveyed via artistic performance. Furthermore, gender segregation and the use of storylines with Islamic features were among the key principles in the Art Policy formulated by the PAS governments. Among the points stipulated in the policy are the following, as published in Pusat Kajian Strategik (2005: ):

- i) The art must be based on Islam practices, beginning with the intention, the type of expression, and the purpose towards the pursuit of God's damnation.

- ii) The art either from within or outside the country can be adopted as long as it is parallel and in accordance with the principles of Islam.
- iii) Other arts that are not based on the principles of Islam can be practised by people on condition that they are not accompanied by non-Muslims.
- iv) All planning and project execution must be based on local artistic characteristics parallel to Islam.
- v) Women and men should be separated in any art activities. Women cannot be seen as male viewing tools.
- vi) The art practices that are contrary to Islamic law must be eradicated and replaced in accordance with the requirements of religion.

From the above, it would be easy to blame PAS for the extinction of Mak Yong. However, this is too simplistic an explanation, and Brennan (2001) has claimed that the genre was already on the decline prior to the election of the PAS State Government, and ascribes this decline mainly to modernisation. Although the ban imposed on the performance of Mak Yong in Kelantan under the Entertainment and Places of Entertainment Control Enactment that prohibited "un-Islamic" local traditional performances, it continued to be performed illegally in enclosed areas and rural settings in Kelantan, as well as in other states in the country. Moreover, Hoffstaedter (2011) has argued that the banning of Mak Yong in Kelantan was only applicable in urban areas because the Kelantan State Government had insufficient religious officers to monitor the whole state. As a result, Mak Yong was still practised secretly from 1991 onwards.

As mentioned above, Brennan (2001) highlighted the factor of modernisation as a contributing factor in the waning of Mak Yong. In line with this view, according to UNESCO (2008), changes in social conditions and cultural taste have contributed to the decline in this ICH because young people generally prefer to work in less-exacting industries that offer better pay. Any ICH requires long practice, and the learning of such crafts is usually time-consuming. In Mak Yong, a rigorous apprenticeship involving many years of training has caused young people to be less interested in this art form. In turn, this has led to reduced dramatic and musical repertoires, as well as a lack of highly experienced performers (UNESCO, 2008).

Another important factor that seems to have played a role in the near-extinction of Mak Yong is that it involves 'trade secrets', which means that the necessary skills and knowledge can only be passed on to family and community members because sharing them with outsiders violates the tradition (Foster, 2015; Kirner, 2015). Hence, problems arise when the group of people who can access these trade secrets is not keen on doing what it takes to continue the tradition, which thus leads to vanished knowledge (UNESCOa, 2011). The traditions and skills that have not been passed on to the new generation have been discussed by Lee et al. (2001), who have emphasised that the erosion of tradition in some settings is due to the loss of biodiversity (a component of ICH), the influence of Western culture, and the emergence of a globalised economy. Also, Lee et al. (2001: 9) have asserted that "people often change the way they do things when new or easier methods of living become available." In this regard, in the context of Mak Yong, Abas (2009), in a study on the stylistic development of Mak Yong costume in Malaysia, found that the structure of not only the performance but also the costumes evolved through numerous phases and that these were shaped by various internal and external influences. Hence the Mak Yong costumes that are worn in the present day are dissimilar to those that were worn in the past; signifying that Mak Yong has been a dynamically evolving tradition over time.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Patton (1990) has suggested that the number of informants depends on "what you want to know, the purpose of inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, and what will have credibility (p.184)." In the current study, the selected informants were interviewed until data saturation was reached, i.e., when there was a recurrence of messages and issues (Coyne, 1997; Hatch, 2002; Moswete, 2012), but bearing in mind that for the saturation point to be reached, the collected data needed to have enough depth, variety, and richness to confirm the existence of patterns and categories in regard to the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The use of the data saturation approach means that the sample number can be tentative, but it does not mean that the sample is small because the sample size still depends on the research design.

Semi-structured interview data were obtained from 14 key informants who had at least six years' experience in performing Mak Yong or who had strong long-term connections and involvement with this art form. . The informants were based in two states – Kelantan and Terengganu – where Mak Yong is known to have been performed for many years. Since the dance itself is very complex and takes many years to perfect, many experts in Mak Yong are either retired or deceased. Hence, the data gained from the 14 informants who agreed to participate had to suffice. Seven of the informants were working in a governmental capacity, and the remaining seven were working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Thus, the sample of informants was

homogeneous. They were selected by using the snowball sampling technique and had adequate exposure to and experiences of Mak Yong, and were also involved directly in sustaining the existence of this performing art. Therefore, they all had the ability to produce highly relevant information for analysis. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Mak Yong informants

Informant Code	Occupation	Work experience (in years)	Sector
I1	Culture Officer	8–9	Government
I2	Secretary of Cultural Council	13	Government
I3	MakYong vocal teacher	60	NGO
I4	President of Artists' Association of Kelantan	60	NGO
I5	President of Cultural Council Besut District	7	NGO
I6	Vice-president for Cultural Council Besut District	+10	NGO
I7	Culture Officer at the National Department for Culture and Arts Kelantan	30	Government
I8	Head of division in Terengganu State Muzium	12	Government
I9	Mak Yong Trainer	50	NGO
I10	Executive Director of institute of historical and legal studies	20	Government
I11	Culture Officer in UMT	5	NGO
I12	Director of National Department for Culture and Arts Terengganu	13	Government
I13	Dancer/activist of ASWARA	20	NGO
I14	Assistant Director of the Culture Department	11	Government

The informants were contacted in advance via telephone for their consent to an interview appointment. Upon agreement, the actual face-to-face audio-taped interview session or phone conversation (which ranged from 30 to 60 minutes) was conducted using the following open-ended research questions: (1) What are the challenges that the practitioner faces in preserving Mak Yong? (2) How do these challenges influence the preservation of Mak Yong?. The interview were transcribed verbatim and then were imported into Atlas ti. Software for analysis.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 The challenges in preserving Mak Yong

Most of the informants agreed that Mak Yong was deteriorating. The analysis of the interview data revealed that the informants perceived that five main challenges facing Mak Yong, with religion ranking the highest (twelve informants), followed by politics (nine informants), lack of expertise and experience (five informants), modernisation (three informants) and community (two informants), which ranked the lowest. Each of these factors is discussed in detail below.

### 5.2 Religion

The interest of some Malays in reviving a 'truer' interpretation of Islam, instead of continuing to follow past Malay traditions that incorporate elements of Islam, folk superstition, and magic, sparked the formation of PAS in the year 1951. This political party proposed that the state should be built upon Islamic teaching as a way of life (*ad-deen*), and suggested that religion and culture should be seen as one. It, therefore, follows that Malays who believe in *ad-deen* practices will eventually reject the art of Mak Yong because it transgresses Islamic boundaries, such as the integration of both men and women in the sharing of the performance space, women acting like men, and vice versa, as well as shamanic healing practices (Brennan, 2001). The prohibition of mixing between sexes was shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Mixing between sexes

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Religion	Mixing between sexes	<i>Kelantan is still banning Mak Yong performances due to free mixing between women and men...and female dancers in Kelantan are inappropriate and cannot perform publicly (I1)</i>

*Do not mix..if it's a man... man..if it's a woman... woman...they cannot mix (I9)*

*Women cannot perform on stage..so we have to emphasis on that...for safety reasons (I11)*

*Before this...for instance, there was a mixture of dancers in traditional saba dance...; however, when the government changed...all the dances that involved women and men were considered haram(forbidden), especially the dances that involve a worshipping element (I8)*

However, this prohibition can be bendable if the performance objective is educational and if the performance takes place in a theatre. Nevertheless, the performance still needs to take place in an enclosed space within a controlled environment. In other words, the performance needs to comply with sharia (Islamic law) (refer Table 3).

Table 3: Enclose space

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Religion	Enclose space	<i>...you're actually allowed to perform in a theatre...with a mixture of man and woman.. (I14)</i>  <i>...if the performance is within the university area, we can have a woman dancer on stage. However, if it involves outsiders spectators, then it will be forbidden. (I11)</i>

In term of shamanic healing practices, the informants differed in their views on this aspect of Mak Yong. On the one hand, some recognized the ritualistic nature of this art form as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Ritualistic performance

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Religion	Ritualistic performance	<i>Mak Yong could be said to be haram (forbidden) because of the customs. Just before the dance, an act of worship needs to be done by providing turmeric, chicken and in the ward a roof should have one roof and place the items worshipped there, and these are then randomly thrown into the sea. This is the first and foremost reason for the belief that Mak Yong is illegal is because there is a spiritual element.(I1)</i>  <i>...before the performance starts, [an act of] worship like burning incense and so on is performed, which has led to disinterest among the Malay community.(I2).</i>

On the other hand, some informants considered Mak Yong solely as performance art rather than as having any ritual meaning or significance, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Performance

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Religion	Performance	<i>Mak Yong is more of a theatrical performance that is similar to other Asian [forms of] theatre. It has a mixture of music, singing, acting, dancing, and singing. Performances are accompanied by singing and dancing along with acting (I12).</i>  <i>The lyrical language of Mak Yong is 80% memorised and 20% repetition. Since it is in the Sanskrit language, it involves memorising the lyrics. When you memorise the song then you can sing it...sometimes it does not have any meaning either spiritual or otherwise (I7).</i> <i>This tradition (Mak Yong) is considered as haram (forbidden) due to its spiritual element. However, currently, spiritual elements are no longer incorporated into Mak Yong performance. All superstitious and spiritual elements have been discarded. (I5)</i>  <i>If I am called to become a cultural panel, I will defend Mak Yong from people who speculate about the issues of superstition, forgetfulness, shirk, and so on. I will debate with them about the elements of Islam, the elements of goodness in Mak Yong, and who can uphold the dignity of the Malay people.. (I13)</i>

*...previously, Mak Yong used to have shirk, but not anymore. The government seems to confuse Mak Yong with main Puteri dance (I9)*

*Mak Yong is considered a theatrical performance for aristocrats (I14)*

Brennan (2001) has suggested that religion may have implications for the performance arts in Kelantan. Similarly, Musa and Yunos (2011) have stated that Islam prohibits cultural practices that induce polytheism and a distraction from the Creators, such as magic, sorcery, singing, and dancing. It has also been argued that the prohibition of certain cultural practices by religious law can indirectly lead to the decline of a culture (Bakar et al., 2014). This indicates that ICH is always interrelated with religious beliefs (Lenzerini, 2011)

### 5.3 Political Ideology

The concept of *ad-deen* among Muslim believers is inextricably bound up with religion, politics, and cultural traditions. Since PAS has been governing Kelantan and Terengganu states, policies have been based on the PAS interpretation of the Islamic moral values and ideals (Brennan, 2001). Several informants commented on the influence of politics on the existence of Mak Yong: as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Authorities

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Politic	Authorities	<i>[..]restrictions from the higher authorities ... from the stakeholders... the state government. If we look at it and understand Terengganu and Kelantan ... it is a bit difficult for Mak Yong to survive in these states. (I8)</i>  <i>[..]Terengganu is governed by PAS..so we have to be more alert...Terengganu and Kelantan restrict women dancers... most of the dancers in Mak Yong are women." (I11)</i>

However, the Entertainment Enactment is more lenient when it involves performing to tourists and students; and for the purposes of study or research, as mentioned by informants I6, I5, and I11. Such performances for tourists and students also need to follow certain rules and conditions such as being staged in a closed and controlled environment, as explained by informants I1, I5, I6, I7, I11, and I12.

Here, it is worth mentioning that it seems strange that the ban on Mak Yong is still in force at the time of writing in the year 2020 when in 2009, the Kelantan State Government had issued a statement saying that they were ready to review the ban imposed on Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, and Manora traditions if intensive studies could prove that they do not conflict with Islamic practices. It has been assumed that up to this time (2020), some Mak Yong performers are still maintaining certain aspects of the dance that are against Islamic teaching, such as males dressing like a females, male and female performers sharing the same stage, and the making of invocations to the spirits. These issues in relation to the lifting of the Mak Yong ban were mentioned by the Mufti of Kelantan, Datuk Mohamad Shukri Mohamed, in 2017: "*Mak Yong is forbidden when men dress like women and then mix freely. We also learn that worship and profanity are shirk.*"

The restrictions imposed on Mak Yong by the Kelantan State Government have forced some of the performers to migrate to urban areas where the audiences are more tolerant of un-Islamic activities and where there are generally more people who appreciate various forms of aesthetic expression. However, both the performance and the stage setup need to be modified in order to meet the taste of the metropolitan audience, which goes against the grain of traditional Mak Yong aesthetics. This is supported by the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Arts and Cultural Centre (2017), which revealed the variances between the commercialised Mak Yong performances of urban dancers in comparison to those staged by rural performers. This difference has contributed to the loss of the identity and integrity of this traditional genre of dance-drama, which could ultimately result in the loss of its status as one of the UNESCO-recognised masterpieces of intangible heritage (Nasaruddin, 2017). The dilemma of trying to maintain a tradition through adapting to current society was highlighted, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Adaptation

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Politic	Adaptation	<i>Mak Yong can't change too much .... if you change it then there will be no traditional element, it will deviate from its original cultural value.(I9)</i>

*Nowadays we have shortened it [the performance] to two hours. So basically the story is not complete but for entertainment, it is acceptable.(113)*

*Why does it need to be this long? Why does it need to be shortened..Aaaa...Aaa..can we examine the structure of the lyrics...just to know why reducing the lyrics is not acceptable ...if the song lyrics are reduced, the meaning of the song will entirely disappear.(17)*

The loss of the originality and authenticity of the internal value of culture has been discussed in a past research study, where it has been shown that the government's reconstruction of the country's folkloric tradition into a profitable tourism resource has contributed to changes in both cultural meaning and function (Zhiqin, 2015). Moreover, Nasaruddin (2018: 2) has asserted: "It is not enough just to get recognition; it is more important to ensure continuity and to preserve originality." However, Olalera (2019) and Phillips and Steinner (1999) believe that in order for a culture to be revitalised and sustained, its traditions need to be transformed and shaped according to the developments in society so that it will remain significant and important to that society. From this perspective, allowing Mak Yong to cross-fertilise with the religious and cultural dynamics of its surroundings will ensure that Mak Yong remains economically viable and thus revitalise its existence. This requires the implementation of a combination of two methods, where the first is to preserve the original value of the dance so that the recognition from the UNESCO will continue, and the second is to commercialise the dance in order to attract younger generations of Malaysians and tourists.

#### 5.4 Community

Culturalism is a concept where religion is embedded into a culture, and the believer community develops its own customs, social fabric, diet, and so on. Since most of the communities in the states of Terengganu and Kelantan share a strong faith in Sharia, thus Mak Yong is generally perceived as *haram* (forbidden) and should therefore be avoided because it involves worshipping others rather than Allah. This indicates that the rise of religion can shape the community preference towards a cultural tradition such as Mak Yong, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Perception

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Community	Perception	<i>The challenge is that people sometimes misunderstand, especially parents. They do not understand what Mak Yong is. They think negative thoughts... don't go to Mak Yong... when there is nothing to be afraid of. (19).</i>  <i>The locals see Mak Yong as one of the most extreme heritages in worshipping...previously, before starting the performance, a worshipping ritual was done that involved burning incense and so on which led to a lack of interest in the culture among the locals. (12)</i>

Without the community recognising the Mak Yong as part of their cultural legacy, the need to revitalise and to preserve them has become irrelevant. This is in alignment with

#### 5.5 Lack of expertise and experience

Mak Yong is a Malay art form that requires its practitioners to be storytellers, actors, singers, dancers, musicians, and often, healers. Well-trained Mak Yong performers usually hone and refine their entire performance based upon their deep understanding of authentic storylines and stock characters. Without the deep insight of Mak Yong practice, the performers might not be able to grasp the art (Hardwick, 2009). Thus, the performers require a well-trained trainer, which decreases by the year. Refer Table 9

Table 9: Well-trained trainer

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Lack of expertise and experience	Well-trained trainer	<i>We do not have teachers who are really experts in the field of Mak Yong. (12).</i>  <i>One of the obstacles is the use of language and dance in Mak Yong theatre which is difficult to follow because we do not have the right trained teachers in the field of Mak Yong. (14)</i>

In line with the comments made by I2 and I4 above, as well as remarks made by I1 and I6, Mak Yong is now somewhat diminished due to the retirement or demise of experienced performers. This issue was identified over a decade ago by Hardwick (2009), who also noted that most of the Mak Yong masters were either elderly or had already passed on, and it was thus becoming increasingly difficult to pass the knowledge of the art to the next generation. Consequently, because the Mak Yong dance tradition is meticulous, the new generation is unable to completely incorporate the requisite skills into their performance. As a corollary, the existence of dancers lacking incompetence is contributing to the decline of Mak Yong, as highlighted in Table 10:

Table 10: Lack of Expert

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Lack of expertise and experience	Death	<i>[..]the initiator has gone, and we also have no successor who can take Mak Yong itself forward (I4)</i>  <i>The individuals who were the lead actresses at Besut Theatre, Makcik Jah and Mok Siti, are unable to uphold this cultural heritage. Currently, Makcik Jah is already dead. So now there is only one budayawan [cultural expert] left, Mok Siti from Mak Yong Cempaka Willis dance group (I2)</i>

As a result, current performers can only convey the physical form and outer layer of Mak Yong, while none invoke the inner spiritual aspect or *angin* (inner wind) of this performing art (Mohamad, 2012). The decreasing number of veteran Mak Yong performers has been recognised by the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Arts and Cultural Centre (2017), which found that fewer than ten veterans were still active at the time of that study. Some notable performers were mentioned by one informant:

As the preservation of Mak Yong is dependent on oral transmission, a shortage of experienced performers is leading to a steady decline (IH). In addition, Mak Yong is waning as an art form because, as mentioned above, the skills and knowledge are passed only to family members due to the lack of interest among outsiders. The importance of and preference for transmission through the family in ensuring the continuance of Mak Yong was Table 11.

Table 11: Family transmission

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Lack of expertise and experience	Family transmission	<i>Mok Ti or Mak Siti. Her family is all involved with Mak Yong. Her children..her niece...it is not because she does not want to pass the knowledge to others, but no one wants to accept it.....only her family. (I6).</i>  <i>[..] Mak Yong is usually passed on to the next generation...it will be difficult when involve outsider. Family is different...minimal effort...gain a lot. (I9)</i>

In contradictory to the literature that suggests the knowledge transfer for Mak Yong was limited to the family due to the tradition and trade secrets (Kirner (2015) and Foster (2015), this study found that the knowledge transmission was more about convenience.

## 5.6 Modernisation

Mak Yong has not been spared the effects of urbanisation and modernisation. Coupled with easy access to the global pool of knowledge via the Internet, influences from global trends are unavoidable, and according to the informants, have also contributed to the declining interest in this art form:

Table 13: Modernisation

Theme	Subtheme	Quotation
Modernisation	interest	<i>Mak Yong needs to compete with modern entertainment in this era. Youth prefer to have fun and prefer entertainment such as concerts, parties, and socialising. Because youth are not interested in cultural art, they will feel bored. (I1)</i>  <i>[..] young people are now less interested because, for them, the dance is outdated. [I2]</i>  <i>[..] the new generation experience challenges...k-pop...hip hop...and other outside influences [cultures]... were those in the age range of 20</i>

*years old do not really like Mak Yong since it is too ancient and classic...*  
 (I11)

The impact of modernisation on local youth has created a lack of appreciation and understanding of traditions (Siti Zainon, 1985; Gilman, 2015). This reduced interest among the younger generation can also lead to a very serious problem with a lack of selfhood and identity (Kearney & Kowalewski, 2016). In this regard, Lubecka (2013), who focused on national identity in the context of Poland, has suggested that it is acceptable to acknowledge the existence of modernisation; however, not to the extent of leaving behind tradition and cultural heritage. Therefore the author proposed a method to preserve cultural roots with the help of advertisements in order to re-establish self-respect, self-confidence, self-worth, and self-pride among the younger generation.

Even though the Malaysian government has attempted at the federal level to revive the structure of the ancient tradition of Mak Yong through the use of new dimensions and sometimes ornaments coupled with new artistic techniques and methods, these attempts seem to have been somewhat ineffective (Abas, 2009). Indeed, the decline in this performing art has been exacerbated by the ban on performances at the state government level, which has reduced the exposure of the younger generation to the tradition (Shurentheran, 2017).

Based on the above findings, this study has produced a framework that shows the relationships between the themes and factors affecting Mak Yong. In comparison to the previous studies that only identify the challenges in preserving Mak Yong, this study reveals the interdependencies of the factors such as political ideology with religion and community with religion. This study shows that a community that has a strong belief in religion will elect a political party that has the same ideology. This will then have an adverse effect on cultural traditions that do not fit the majority paradigm. This framework is presented in Figure 1.

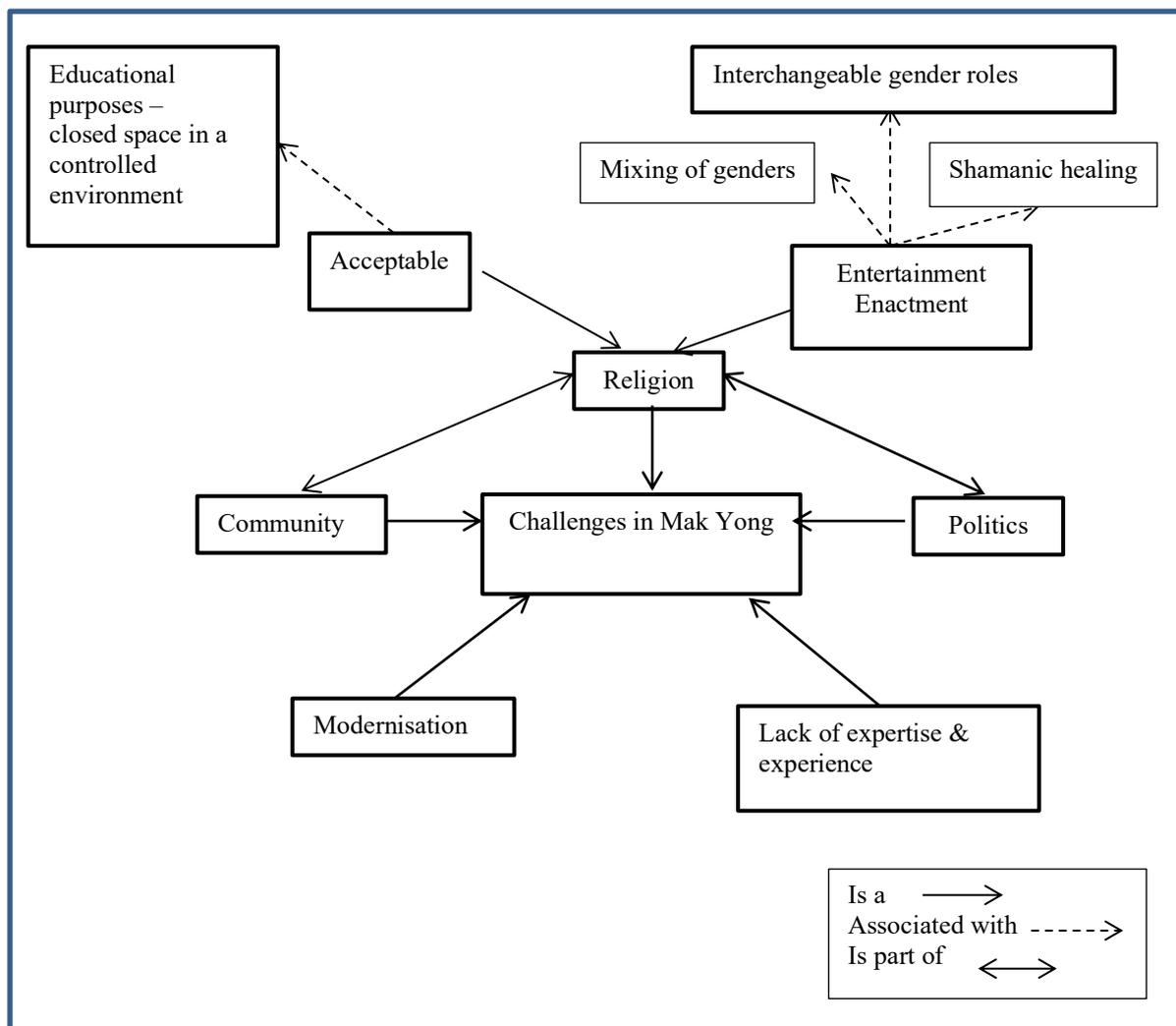


Fig. 1: Framework of Mak Yong challenges in East Coast of Malaysia

## 6. CONCLUSION

Some government officials and members of non-government organisations (NGOs) deliberately view that the rise of a religious-based political party in the East Coast of Malaysia as the prime contributor to Mak Yong deterioration. Yet, this judgment is untrue since the result indicates that the suggested enactment applies by the political party, PAS, are the result of the wishes of the Malay Muslim community who wish to uphold and apply the tenets of their religion in their way of life. This is consistent with the literature that suggests Mak Yong was in decline before the PAS was elected to form a state government in Kelantan and in Terengganu in 1990 (Brennan, 2001). Therefore, regardless of the existence of PAS-led state governments, Mak Yong may still be erased from the community, especially because Malays have begun to apply rules on art and performance based on Islamic teachings. Thus it can be said that, without the support and involvement of the Malay community, Mak Yong will not be able to survive for much longer.

The ban on Mak Yong that was imposed by the PAS government, along with the pulls and pushes of modernisation has exacerbated the situation because the ban has removed access to this art form and modernisation has affected the musical taste of the younger generation, and consequently the youth of today no longer see Mak Yong as part of their cultural identity. The outdated dance moves and the time length needed to master this dance-drama have further complicated the issue of finding ways to preserve this ICH. Finally, the increasing age and the demise of the few remaining experts is also a key factor in the decline of this traditional art form, besides the religious and political factors mentioned above.

In light of the findings, it seems plausible that a discussion and collaboration among the stakeholders are required to minimize the treats to Mak Yong culture. By having a mutual understanding between the stakeholders, Mak Yong culture can be sustained and preserved for the next generation by providing education, information dissemination, and the application and exploitation of new technology in documenting and achieving.

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