

## **Mek Mulong: Kedah's Unique Folk Performance<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** The essay considers a type of Malay folklore found in the state of Kedah, the *mek mulong*, which can be categorised as a folk performance. The authentic *mek mulong* still thrives in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus in Jitra. The essay examines *mek mulong* as the Kedah Malays' traditional heritage. It analyses the uniqueness of this performance. The essay is based on both Western and local studies on folk performances notably its healing ritual which is not often shown to the public. So far there has been no substantive study on *mek mulong* while most of the earlier writings on *mek mulong* are brief, descriptive documentation type of studies. A more in-depth analysis aims to uncover its special features and the uniqueness of this traditional folk performance. In a way the essay is a contribution towards the preservation of folk traditions as without any form of dynamic activism, such folk performances are threatened with extinction.

**Keywords and phrases:** *mek mulong*, folk performance, Malay folklore, Kedah, heritage

### **Introduction**

Nearly all the Malay communities of Peninsular Malaysia have their distinctive folk performances that are part of the local oral tradition. The pride of each community is centred on its traditions that were handed down from one generation to another and on the uniqueness of its folk performances, which are different from those of other states. The people of Kelantan are proud of their *mak yong* and *mienora* while those of Terengganu take pride in their *ulik mayang* (see Mohamed Ghouse Nasarudin 2000).

In Sarawak, the Ibans are well known for their *ngajat* dance. Sabah too is equally well known for its *sumazau* and many other traditional performances. All these performing traditions are practiced by individual communities without any imitation or influence from folk performances of the other states. Hence, the locally owned or as Dundes (1965) terms it, "locally recognised" traditions are bound intimately to its native spirit and origins.

However, there is very little discussion on traditional Kedah folk performance. Very seldom one could find writings or studies particularly on Kedah oral traditions. Yet Kedah has its own folk tradition, in the form of a traditional performance known as *mek mulong*. *Mek mulong* is categorised as "folklore"

performance by Dundes (1965; 1980),<sup>2</sup> an oral tradition by Mohd Taib Osman (1982) while Mohamed Ghouse (2000) groups it under traditional Malay theatre. *Mek mulong* is an important Kedah tradition that still exists in this modern age even though it is increasingly challenged by a variety of factors including Islamic revivalism. *Mek mulong*, which combines elements of storytelling, singing, acting, dancing as well as healing ritual, is still enjoyed and accepted by the people of Kampung Baru Wang Tepus in Jitra. This means that *mek mulong* performance has become an important cultural form which should be documented and analyse from different perspectives so that folk performing tradition such as this one are made available to future generations.

In the current context, existing studies on the *mek mulong* performance are limited, compared to studies on the *mak yong*, which receives considerable attention, not just from the general public but also from those who undertake research on culture. Studies on *mak yong* are extensive, as this folk art is well known. In fact, it is synonymous with Kelantan culture. In the context of the *mek mulong*, Mohamed Ghouse (2000) touches on the *mek mulong* performance in his book *Teater Tradisional Melayu*. The study, in the form of documentation, focuses on its performance, props, actors and the equipment used.

Zainal Alam Kadir (2002) in his essay "Keeping *mek mulong* Alive"—published in the *New Straits Times*—briefly discussed *mek mulong* performance and suggests several measures to ensure its sustainability as a performing tradition. A similar effort was undertaken by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism through the publication of book by Mohd Ghazali Abdullah (1995) on this traditional Malay theatre. Besides describing the different folk performing traditions of Malaysia, the book provides a brief commentary on *mek mulong*. Despite its brevity, the description provides useful information on such traditions to the general public. In 2003, the ministry also published *Siri Mengenal Budaya*, which includes a *mek mulong* performance. However, the presentation is focused mainly on documenting and recording of the performance in a more formal stage setting. It does not convey the authentic performing environment as undertaken by the Wang Tepus community.

Another study on *mek mulong* by Shazryn Mohd Faizal (2010) comments on the efforts of staging the *mek mulong* within the context of contemporary Malay values. This study showcases the procedures and steps taken to perform *mek mulong*. It is also an important initiative to preserve the tradition. However, it does not highlight details on the authentic *mek mulong*, its traditional heritage and uniqueness of its performance.

This essay is based on field research undertaken in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus, Jitra during a *mek mulong* performance. It is divided into two parts. The first part

focuses on the *mek mulong* performance tradition and documentation of the performance. The second part focuses on the *mek mulong*'s healing ritual. The latter is considered unique because the healing ritual is performed in open view before the Kampung Baru Wang Tepus villagers, after the completion of the first part that involved the usual story telling, singing, dancing and acting. As there is a lack of focus on the healing ritual in previous studies, this essay discusses this unique element, the function of the ritual, its influence, the connection to the singing, dancing and acting which determine whether the ritual is just a side-act or an intrinsic part of the *mek mulong* performance.

### **The *Mek Mulong* Tradition Based on Oral Sources**

In discussing the folk performing tradition, it is crucial to know where a particular performance originates from or where it was started, and the people who had introduced it. However, it is difficult to find any written documents explaining its origin or the practice of any of the folk performances. As an intrinsic part of the oral tradition, it is handed down orally. In other words, the facts surrounding the performance are only known orally by the people to whom the tradition belongs. This means that there would be different versions of the tradition and origin of *mek mulong*.

With regards the oral traditions, Mohamed Ghouse (2000, 78–80) highlights several versions of the story-telling tradition in relation to the origins of *mek mulong*. The first version recounts the story of the Raja of Ligor (in present day Thailand) who had seven beautiful daughters. Puteri Bongsu, the youngest princess was detested by her jealous sisters who instigated their father the Raja Ligor to banish her from the kingdom. In her exile, Puteri Bongsu was accompanied by a lady-in-waiting who took care of her. As time passed by, Puteri Bongsu grew up into a beautiful maiden. During her exile, she learnt how to tell stories, sing and dance from her nursemaid who tried to keep the princess entertained. When she grew into an adult, she became a *penglipur lara* or "healer-of-torment", moving from one village to another telling folktales and singing. These provided entertainment to the people. Her performance was well received by the Kampung Baru Wang Tepus villagers. This led Puteri Bongsu to set up a troupe known as *mek mulong*.

Another story begins with a couple in Ligor who were yearning for a child. They prayed to God and were finally blessed with a baby girl who was delivered with the assistance of *Bidan Ketujuh* or the Seventh Midwife. According to popular belief, the presence of *Bidan Ketujuh* indicates the birth of a child with magical powers. News of the magical baby who was named Mek Julong spread far and wide and people started to migrate to Ligor. Eventually, a state was formed there with the child's father appointed Raja. When the child grew up, she showed a

strong interest in dancing and singing. Her favourite song was *Kecik Milik* which is often sung during present day *mek mulong* performances. Finally, her father established a troupe to recite folk tales and for singing and acting in the state.

The *Siri Mengenal Budaya* (2003) claims *mek mulong* originated from Ligor. It was subsequently introduced into Kedah during the Kedah-Siam conflict in the 18th century, first in Kampung Perit, Kurung Itam sub district in Kuala Nerang. It then spread to Kampung Belukar Mulong, Kampung Paya Keladi and finally to Kampung Baru Wang Tepus.

Interviews with Ahmad Shahadan, a *mek mulong* performer in Wang Tepus, indicate that there are many variations of the story, especially in terms of the source and origin of the performance until the present time.<sup>3</sup> *Mek mulong* is said to have been started by a couple from Kedah who were hated by the families of their in-laws. In dejection, they went to Ligor. The husband was called Pak Mohar and his wife Bunga. They cultivated hill paddy or *padi huma*. Not long after, Bunga became pregnant and only Pak Mohar tended the fields as Bunga had to stay at home. When it was close to the time of her delivery, an old woman appeared, claiming to be *Bidan Ketujuh*. The old woman prophesied that the child who would soon be born would someday become "great". With *Bidan Ketujuh's* assistance, Bunga gave birth to a daughter who was named Mek Julong. As Mek Julong was growing up, the young lady became more and more skilful in arranging flowers without any string (this became the opening song of *mek mulong* performance). Mek Julong was also said to have loved dancing. Subsequently, Pak Mohar made a drum from cowhide to accompany his daughter's dancing. After some time, the people were attracted to this spectacle and they began to beat the drum and play the flute. The performance later came to be known as *mek mulong*, which come from the words "Mek" (referring to a daughter) and "Mu" (from *kamu*, you, the eldest).

According to this oral source, there was a prince in ancient Kedah who ran away with his nursemaid because the king had attempted to kill him. According to the prophecy of the palace astrologer, the prince had to be killed for he would bring misfortune to the royal family. The nursemaid took pity on the prince and was unable to bring himself to kill the prince. Both ran away to Ligor. There, they met Pak Mohar and his daughter Mek Julong who were at the time beating their drums, singing and dancing. The prince then took on an acting role to complete the performance. The meeting of Pak Mohar's family with the Kedah prince and his nursemaid enhanced the *mek mulong* performance with dancing, music, singing and story telling. Story of kings and palace life were later begun to be incorporated into the *mek mulong* performances.

However, when Siam attacked Kedah, eight members of the *mek mulong* troupe returned to Kedah to live in Kampung Perik in the Padang Terap sub district. Here, they resumed the *mek mulong* performance, moving from one place to another. The group finally settled in Wang Tepus. Since then it has been based in this village. The present *mek mulong* performers are believed to be descendants of the original generation of *mek mulong* group. It was in this context that *mek mulong* was passed down to Haji Salleh Embut whom the author met during a *mek mulong* performance in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus.

According to the oral sources, the *mek mulong* performance originated from, and was inspired by, the people of Kedah who had escaped to Thailand. On their return to Kedah, they revived the performance, which had not changed until the present day. The assumptions and conjectures that the performance originated entirely from Thailand<sup>1</sup> have to be reconsidered based on this oral evidence.

In the current context, the tradition of this performance can be traced back to two generations. Ahmad Shahadan (Figure 1), who had been involved in *mek mulong* performance in the past few years, began learning and inheriting *mek mulong* from Haji Salleh Embut in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus (Figure 2). He had been following Haji Salleh's performance since he was a little boy. At that time, Haji Salleh was accompanied by Saad Taib. It was from here that Ahmad Shahadan learnt the *mek mulong*. At the moment, only Ahmad Shahadan and Saad are still active as Haji Salleh had passed away in 2009 after his final performance in 2008 in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus.



Figure 1. Inheritor of *mek mulong*: Ahmad Shahadan (source: author)



**Figure 2.** Inheritors of *mek mulong*: Haji Salleh Embut (deceased) who passed the *mek mulong* craft to Ahmad Shahadan (source: author)

### ***Mek Mulong*: A Folk Performance**

Dundes (1965) states that most folklore traditions are owned by villagers and farmers as these traditions are a source of entertainment in their free time, in addition to being a way to celebrate certain festivals. This view gives the impression that folk performance or Malay traditional theatre was originally performed in rural, traditional areas isolated from the hustle and bustle of the city. Additionally, these performances are not just mediums of banishing weariness but also potentially a source of pride for the community that owns them. The uniqueness and speciality of traditional performances that are inherited make the performance popular even when they are performed in the rural areas.

Bauman (1992, 35) states that, "Every group has its own folklore and will continue to do so as long as people continue to come together in groups". This observation is equally valid to *mek mulong* which is performed by a group in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus. This group of *mek mulong* performers still maintain the tradition faithfully while Wang Tepus is synonymous with the authentic *mek mulong*. The fact that the performance still survives after several generations is strong evidence that this folk performance had withstood the test of time.

As folk entertainment *mek mulong* is not as elaborate as other folk performances. The costumes and instruments are simple. *Mek mulong* is usually performed in a

shed constructed in the village by the performers themselves (Figure 3). Mohd Taib Osman (1982, 58) describes this as *mek mulong's* "traditional stage". The performance is organised once a year, usually between July and August. An authentic *mek mulong* performance is held not just any time, but only when the group is invited to perform under the sponsorship of certain parties like the Ministry of Culture or the State Museum. On such occasion, the *mek mulong* performance is rather brief and incomplete compared to the one held at Wang Tepus. According to Ahmad Shahadan, this is due to the small size of the stage, minimal participation by members of the troupe, and the sponsors' time constraints.



**Figure 3.** A traditional *mek mulong* stage in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus, Jitra, Kedah (source: author)

The authentic *mek mulong* performance, which embraces an elaborate traditional convention, is performed only in the original *mek mulong* shed built in the villages notably at Wang Tepus. Bauman (1992, 46) states that, "All performance, like all communication, is situated, enacted and rendered meaningful within a socially defined situational context". In other words, the true meaning of a *mek mulong* performance can only be understood and appreciated if it is performed within the context of the community that owns it and performed within a rural setting.

As folk performance or Malay traditional theatre, *mek mulong* has its own performing conventions that have been passed down from previous generations. These conventions must be strictly adhered to as they shape the unique poetics

that one can observe in *mek mulong* performance which has its own arrangements, features and stage of performance from beginning to end.

Essentially, *mek mulong* involves 15 to 20 performers comprising the *Pak Mulong* (the head of the group who plays the character of the king), *peran* (joker/fool), dancers and musicians (Mohamed Ghouse 2000, 81). In terms of musical instruments, *mek mulong* musical ensemble includes various types of drums—one small, one *semorong* drum and two big drums. Flutes and gongs are still used but the *buluh kecerik*, a musical instrument that emits a high-pitched sound, is no longer used. *Mek mulong* does not involve specific costumes with the performers donning everyday clothes that they consider appropriate for the occasion although there is a preference for traditional Malay outfit complete with headgear. However, the joker/fool wears a mask which is intended to bring laughter to the audience.<sup>5</sup>

In the traditional performance, *mek mulong* begins with a grand feast in the daytime. The feast is meant to celebrate the descendants of *mek mulong* performers, their neighbours and friends. According to the author's informant, this ritual is not affected by any prohibitions, which means anyone from the general public could attend the feast. Traditional dishes usually served include beef curry, dried fish, *ulam* or herbal salads and other local delicacies. A large number of guests usually attend this feast which is held almost every year. The feast provides initial indication of the gaiety of the *mek mulong* performance to be held after sunset. *Mek mulong* is performed over three consecutive nights—Saturday, Sunday and Monday—with Monday being the climax of the performance. It starts with *bertabik*, a salutation ceremony in the form of a song called *karang bunga* or "weaving the garland" which is taken from the history of the *mek mulong* and Mek Julong's skill of arranging flower garlands without any string. After the leader had finished singing, all group members then joined him in singing the same song to the accompaniment of drums, gongs and flutes.

During the *bertabik* ceremony, holy names are invoked to ensure that the performance is free from any disturbances (Mohamed Ghouse 2000, 86). The informant, who is also a leader of this group, claims that if the *bertabik* is not done or improperly executed, the performance will be beset by problems such as performers forgetting the lyrics or story lines. These problems could affect the entire *mek mulong* performance. Even though the *mek mulong* performance is held over three nights, the *bertabik* is held every night prior to each performance. This ritual is sort of basic rule for each performance. The *mek mulong* practitioners or performers adhere strictly to the accepted procedures and safeguard every performing rule just like they had inherited it.



Besides *bertabik*, the performance also involves *bertabuh*, the ceremonial beating of drums. This ritual does not include singing but only the beating of drums and gongs and the sound of flutes. This instrumental ritual is performed for 10–15 minutes without any singing. Once the *bertabik* and *bertabuh* are over, the musicians would start playing *Gerak Timpuh* songs for some time to the movement of male dancers dressed as females. At this stage, the *mek mulong* performance is embellished with elements of music, singing and dancing. The dancing continues for some time to the accompaniment of particular *Gerak Timpuh* songs (Figure 4). The rhythm of the singing and dancing movements attract the audience as "...performance, or other experience that can be sold to and enjoyed by large and heterogeneous groups of people" (Barnouw and Catherine, in Bauman 1992, 50). Acting is also part of the performance. When the *Gerak Timpuh* dance is over, *Pak Mulong* (leader of the performance) begins to tell his story in a sort of drama session known as *lakon* (Figure 5). Usually, the stories performed include "*Cerita Cahaya Bulan*" and "*Dewa Muda*". Although there are other stories like "*Lakon Afrit*", "*Batak Putih*" and "*Malim Bongsu*" (Umi Abdullah 2003, 8). According to the author's informant, the "*Cahaya Bulan*" and "*Dewa Muda*" stories are the most popular. At this stage, the dance group resumes the dancing with *Pak Mulong* for some time, after which he resumes the story-telling and acting with the princess and the fool.



Figure 4. Ahmad Shahadan in the first part of *mek mulong* performance (source: author)



Figure 5. Acting during the first part of *mek mulong* performance (source: author)

The *mek mulong* performance ends when *Pak Mulong* finished enacting the story he is telling. A long story would be narrated over three nights. In the closing stage, the dancers resume the dancing as performed at the beginning and *Pak Mulong* sings the "*Kecik Milik Mengarang Bunga*" again, accompanied by the beating of drums, gongs and the sound of flutes. This signified the end the first part of the performance.

#### Uniqueness of *Mek Mulong*: The "Healing" Ritual

In addition to being a performing art, *mek mulong* also exhibits another aspect of tradition that is most unique. While the first part involves story telling, singing, dancing and acting, the second part is related to traditional healing ritual known as *berubat* or treatment of the sick. Traditional healing, an established practice in village communities, usually displays various unique ways and methods. These have never been documented but the entire process is recorded in the shaman's memory (Mohd Taib 1982, 2). These practices are also found in the *mek mulong*. The healing ritual usually begins after midnight when the first part of the performance is over. When the ritual is about to begin, all actors and dancers change into ordinary clothes and would no longer be dressed in traditional Malay dress and headwear.

According to the informant, the ritual of *berubat* within the *mek mulong* performance is an important element for the performers. It is also a major attraction for the audience as the ritual involves worship of spirits and being possessed by spirits.<sup>6</sup> This draws the attention of the audience who responded

with unusual or interesting actions. The ritual is not just an entertainment but functions as a form of showing respect for the spirits of the ancestors of those who created the *mek mulong*. The fact that it is defined as ritual indicates its significance that should be noted within the context of folk performance. According to Mohd Taib (1989, 49):

Ritual and ceremony are a set of prescribed behaviour which is both symbolic and expressive and which has a specific objective... Rituals are symbolic behaviour because the action represents something else than what is done. The slaughtering of an animal, for instance, represents a sacrifice offered to a deity whose favour the votary or worshipper is soliciting. Even the objects used in the ritual have symbolic meaning.

The role of rituals is of vital importance in *mek mulong* as it is a symbolic method of showing respect to the ancestors. It is not merely musical or meaningless actions, but actions that symbolise a greater meaning and relevance to the performance as it is a way for "mediums to communicate with certain gods or spirits of ancestors" (Mohd Taib 1982, 30). This corresponds to author's informant's view that the ritual is a medium for connecting them with an ancestor (known as a certain god) who is seen by these communities as their protector. It is believed that these gods descended to the human world and entered the medium so that he could treat sick patients during *mek mulong* performance.

The validity of this view may be witnessed from the beginning of the ritual. At this stage, incense is burned and the musical instruments are "smoked" by *mek mulong* performers by passing them over the incense before the start of the performance. This is to protect the ritual from any "disturbance" as spirits other than that of the ancestors might disturb the ritual.<sup>7</sup> To this day, the performers closely adhere to this ritual.

Once the musical instruments are blessed, the dancers make their entry and stood at the centre of the stage with their heads covered with *batik* cloth. A silver ring is tied with a string and placed on a piece of cloth which is hung from the roof of the stage. A bunch of coconut flowers and betel-nut flowers are placed close by. This is done with the intention of invoking the spirit of the ancestors requesting their presence at the stage. Several earthen jars filled with water are prepared for bathing purposes to ensure bodily health and vitality.

Next, offerings are made in homage to the spirits that would descend to the stage. This is done by serving a quid of betel or *sirih pinang* (areca nut wrapped in betel leaf and condiments), *pulut* (a type of sticky rice), *buah Melaka* (Malay traditional cake with grated coconut and palm sugar), *ketupat* (cubes of rice-

cake), *wajik* (a sticky-rice delicacy), *putu mani* (a local pancake), *cucur lubang* (sweet-rice doughnut) and *bertih* (flattened rice-grain). In traditional Malay belief, the offerings of *pulut*, *beras kunyit* and *bertih* are meant as respect to certain spirits or gods (Skeat 1984, 74–76). Skeat's view on this corresponds to the belief among *mek mulong* practitioners that the purpose of the offerings is solely meant as symbol of respect but never a form of worship although for an outsider, it is difficult to differentiate the two.

Once all the healing paraphernalia is ready, the ritual begins with the beating of drums and gongs by *mek mulong* performers. The drum beat is different from the *bertabik*, *bertabuh* or the *Gerak Timpuh* dance. The music is accompanied by loud chanting of *mantera* or spell by *mek mulong* performers. The following *mantera* is chanted during the performance:

<i>Amboi hae la yang tuan</i>	Hullo! come wondrous sirs
<i>Semangat kami</i>	Our spirits
<i>Amboi hae la yang kami</i>	Hullo! wondrous us
<i>Semangat badan</i>	The body's spirit
<i>Amboi hae bangun pucuk</i>	Hullo! Arise sprout
<i>Bangun pelepah</i>	Arise palm frond
<i>Sila turun guru muda</i>	Please descend young teacher
<i>Sila turun guru muda</i>	Please descend young teacher
<i>Sila turun peran tua</i>	Please descend old clown
<i>Sila turun peran muda</i>	Please descend young clown

Source: Ahmad Shahadan

This *mantera* is recited over and over again by the performers who take turns in doing so until the spirits that they call *nenek* descends into the shed where the performance is taking place and enters the bodies of the performers (Figure 6). According to the informant, this group of spirits are known as *Dewa Muda*, *Dewa Kaca*, *Dewa Ketujuh*, *Dewa Kesuma*, *Dewa Kesakti*, *Peran Tua*, *Peran Muda*, *Peran Kiau*, *Peran Embun*, *Tok Busu Rabbit*, *Tok Petong* and *Tok Imek*. The *mantera* is recited to appeal to these spirits to descend so that the healing ritual could commence. After the descent, the performers who are possessed by the spirits become unconscious. They then get up to dance in the centre of the shed. They get up one by one until all the 12 spirits have descended (Figure 7). They dance to their contentment and when all of them have finished dancing, the healing ritual begins. The patients waiting outside the shed make his/her entry to meet the "gods" who have possessed the bodies of the performers. Each patient is treated with incantations, charms and so forth (Figure 6). The *mek mulong* performance ends in the early hours of the morning when the spirits leave the body of the performers who subsequently regain consciousness.



**Figure 6.** Haji Salleh Embut at the start of a treatment session during the healing ritual (source: author)



**Figure 7.** A *mek mulong* healing ritual (source: author)

Based on the ritual's pattern and process, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is free from animism or Hindu-Buddhist influences since there are several elements in this performance which appear to be in fusion or combined from a myriad of sources.<sup>8</sup> *Mek mulong's* uniqueness is that it encompassed animistic, Hindu and