

***Boria*: Penang's Unique Malay-Islamic Cultural Heritage¹**

SHAKILA ABDUL MANAN
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
shakmanan@gmail.com

Abstract. This essay aims to chart the chronological trajectory of the *boria* in order to show how it had evolved from a ritualistic theatre to become Penang's unique Malay-Muslim cultural heritage. In achieving this aim, the essay traces *boria*'s etymology, its origin and the socio-historical factors that have moulded it into a ritualistic form of theatre. The essay then discusses the features of the *boria* that help to provide it a specific Malay-Muslim identity by exploring factors such as the language of the comic sketches and songs, the transmission of cultural, religious and Malay political values via the *boria* performance. The essay concludes by discussing the factors that have threatened this cultural heritage with extinction and measures that have been taken to revive it.

Keywords and phrases: *boria*, ritualistic theatre, Penang, Malay-Muslim cultural heritage, Jawi-Pekan

Introduction

Unlike past studies that tend to focus on specific aspects of the *boria*, this paper aims to provide an in-depth account of the *boria* in order to show how it had evolved over time to become Penang's unique Malay-Muslim cultural heritage. To achieve this aim, the essay traces *boria*'s etymology, its origin and the socio-historical factors that have moulded it into a ritualistic form of theatre. The essay then discusses the features of the *boria* that help to provide it a unique Penang Malay identity by exploring factors such as the language of the comic sketches and songs, the transmission of cultural, religious and Malay political values via the *boria* performance. The essay concludes by discussing the factors that have threatened the *boria* with extinction and measures taken to revive it.

The *Boria*: Its Etymology and Origin

According to Mozaffari-Falarti (2004), historical accounts of the origin of the word *boria* are rather vague and ambiguous. To prove his point, he makes reference to Haughton (1897) who said in his paper that the *boria* "is of Persian origin, according to Forbes, and means a mat in Hindustani". To him, Haughton's account was confusing, but more than that, one can question its reliability as Haughton did not provide much information about Forbes. In his paper, Haughton also cited an account of *boriah* (not *boria*) from the perspective of an Indian in Penang. To the Indian, "The plain meaning of the word *boriah* in the

Hindustani and Deccan language is a place of prayer (praying mat), and the Malay call it *tikar* (a mat)" (cited in Mozaffari-Falati 2004). The account did not make any reference to Persia nor the Persian language but the Hindustani and Deccan languages only. Mozaffari-Falarti (2004) also said that apart from Haughton, later scholars utilised "other independent sources" in order to "suggest an Indian origin for both the word and performance of *boria*". Mozaffari-Falarti (2004) opines that there is much uncertainty about *boria's* historic origin because of a "lack of nineteenth century primary sources" and that most secondary sources are too "sketchy in detail or somewhat biased towards aspects of the *boria* performance and its participants".

There are also various explanations of the *boria*, some of which are debatable as they are derived from folk etymology and anecdotal accounts. According to the author's oral source,² the word *boria* originated from Persia and it means a kind of receptacle to hold incense and candles or what is known in Malay as *bekas berasap*, one which is passed around during any kind of meetings or get-together. *Boria* could also mean a praying carpet or "*tikar*" on which grief-stricken Persians would sit, to commemorate by wailing and lamenting the brutal slaying of the Muslim/Muhammadan heroes in the first ten days of the month of Muharram. The leader of the group would cry out verses followed by responses from a group of five or six followers. These verse-questions and answers allude to the good deeds, valour and bravery of the Muslim heroes.

He also said that the word *boria* could have originated from the word "*buris*", a group of people of Indian ethnicity from the 21st Madras Regiment. This group of people enacted some song and dance routine during the night-time as a form of entertainment. People from a number of districts in and around Penang such as Kampung Manggis, Titi Papan, Jalan Hatin and Sungai Pinang converged in the city centre to watch this performance. Apparently, during one of these performances, someone from the group of onlookers asked a question, "Who are they (those performing)?" In Penang Malay, "*Siapa depa?*" Another person replied, "*Depa inilah buri*" or "they are known as *buris*" and someone else commented, "*Ya, lah Ya, lah*" meaning "Yes, Yes". Hence, the two words *Buri* and *Ya (buri-ya)* were combined to form the word *boria*. During the performance the members of the Regiment used to wear clothes made of mats to mourn for Hussain, the second son of Ali, Islam's fourth caliph, and they used to recite the following verses (Mubin Sheppard 1965, 39–40):

Boria the best of its kind;
Boria everywhere in the world;
Boria the beautiful (was) seen;
Pristine and pure Boria.

*(Boria yang paling bagus;
Boria di merata dunia;
Boria yang cantik kelihatan;
Boria yang suci dan tulin.)*

*In the country of Madras;
The Boria is made of grass;
Fences are made from bamboo;
Boria is green in colour, etc. etc.*

*(Di dalam negara Madras;
Boria dibuat daripada rumput;
Pagar dibuat daripada rotan;
Boria hijau warnanya.)*

Saravanamuthu (1970, 73) in the *Sara Saga* described *boria* (he spelt it Borea) as "a typically Malay institution which was practiced most enthusiastically in Penang". According to him, various "*boria* parties were formed on a territorial basis". The participants or performers were dressed in fancy costumes and went around town during the month of Muharram entertaining audiences with "improvised Malay ditties" (Saravanamuthu 1970, 73). Saravanamuthu also wrote that verses joined by the chorus "somewhat after the style of the calypso of the West Indies". After the *boria* season the various parties held a grand meeting at the central venue and they were judged according to their singing and costumes. Saravanamuthu felt that *boria* is one "excellent example of the simple folk culture of the Malays".

According to Wazir Jahan Karim (2009, 52), the *boria* "is closely connected to the Islamic migrant culture of Penang's Sunnite Jawi Peranakan communities but which has, over decades, been instituted as a State performance by Sunni Malays". Currently, the *boria* has taken on another meaning as the Malays refer to it as a song and dance routine enacted by a group of performers singing praises of the State or any prominent leader who patronises the *boria* troupes (Wazir 2009, 52). She further adds that this is indeed significant as it shows "ritual secularisation moving along with multi-cultural identity and hybridisation".

Boria as Ritualistic Theatre

Boria originated from performances of tragic, passion plays, known as *taziya* enacted by Shia or Shiite Muslim communities in Iran and Northern India to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain, the second son of Ali, Islam's fourth caliph, at the Battle of Kerbala on 10 Muharram 610 A.H. (Ghulam-Sarwar 2002). The plays also lamented the brutal slaying of Ali, his first son, Hassan,

and other members of the family, who were highly respected in the Shia community. The plays were often gory in nature as players re-enacted the brutal slayings in order to arouse violent emotions in the spectators. The *taziya* also included other activities such as processions, lamentations and self-flaggellations (Ghulam-Sarwar 2002).

According to Haughton (1897, 312–313), *boria* was brought over to Penang in 1845 by the 21st Regiment of Madras which was brought over by the British "to garrison the fort" (Rahmah 1987, 1). Indian Muslims of the regiment obtained leave during the first ten days in the month of Muharram to celebrate this annual Shiite festival. In a journal article in 1858, Vaughan (cited in Rahmah 1987, 1) stated that the *boria* was an activity participated by Penang's Sunnite Jawi Pekan community. The Jawi Pekan (urban Malay) or Jawi Peranakan community was a product of the union or intermarriage between local Malay women and migrant Indian Muslims of Hadrami or Tamil descent who had flourished in this vibrant and bustling port of call through trade and commerce. Their offspring spoke the Malay language at home and over time through "cultural integration and assimilation" Indian or Tamil elements disappeared as the Jawi Peranakan incorporated Malay culture, dressing, food and language into their own culture (Wazir 2009, 17). The *boria* lost its religious significance when the local Malays secularised it, as being Sunnis, they felt alienated from Shiite history and the rituals that were being performed by the Shiite community in Iraq and Persia during the month of Muharram (Mozafarri-Falarti 2004; Wazir 2009, 52).

The *Koli Kallen* or Fowl Thieves Performance

In its early days, the *boria* consisted of a day-performance as well as a night-performance. The day-performance which was also known as the *Koli Kallen* or "Fowl Thieves Performance" (see Pieries 2009, 167) took place from the 1st to the 10th of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar. It was performed between noon and four by young Malay boys who were also involved in the night performance of the *boria*. The *Koli Kallen* had an element of play, fun and fighting and, as such, it appealed to the boys. This day-performance familiarised the boys with the procedures of *boria* and thus acted as a form of training institution. The original *boria* performance was the *Koli Kallen* performance; it was one where the performers wore masks, and blackened or painted their faces with different chalk-marks and multi-varied designs. For music, they improvised by using tin cans as drums, wore long robes and funny-shaped hats. The local Malays took keen interest in this type of performance and later adopted it.³

According to the author's oral source, the *Koli Kallen* is a word translated from Tamil which means *pencuri ayam* (fowl thief). Besides wearing masks, the performers smeared their faces with charcoal, wore dirty clothes, cross dressed

and placed red chillies in their ears to resemble ear-rings or even onions and by chanting "who are the children of the fowl thieves?", they appear to celebrate "petty criminality" (Pieries 2009, 167). The dancers also dressed up as tigers, a theme borrowed from the Chinese Tiger Festival. According to Pieries (2009, 168), these can be read as important "symbolic inversions" and parody, a form of "carnival" and a celebration of marginalia (as some of them were former convicts), carried out in the main to challenge "conventional forms of authority".

The masking functioned as a form of disguise as the *Koli Kallen* performance did not just provide a source of entertainment but was also used to collect donations for a more resplendent *boria* performance during the night time. Donations were collected when the whole troupe of *Koli Kallen* performers visited each wealthy person's house. Early lyrics of their songs alluded to religious texts but the later ones became more secular, praising and extolling the virtues of the wealthy patrons and merchants. This reflected the diminishing Shiite influence and a shift from a "religious to a theatrical performance", a clear indicator of its Malayanisation process (Pieries 2009, 167). The shift may also be attributed to the increasing number of migrants who felt satisfied that they were being identified and accepted as members of a local theatre group (Pieries 2009, 166). It also marked the beginning of a form of patronage for the wealthy and powerful few, apart from showing the socio-economic chasm and class distinction that existed between the wealthy few and the marginalised *Koli Kallen* performers, some of whom were former convicts. Since the players were adults and being Malays (according to the author's oral source, a Malay child is taught not to accept or ask for donations), they were shy and might be embarrassed if they were recognised or spotted by the people of their *kampung* or village. Below is a typical verse taken from a *Koli Kallen* performance:⁴

*We are descendants of Koli Kallen
 Dirty at day time but dressed in the night;
 Do not obey others
 Residents of Jelutong subdistrict, the subdistrict is ours.*

*(Sayapa sekelian anak Koli Kallen
 Siang berkotor malamlah bersalin;
 Tidaklah turut pada orang lain
 Mukim Jelutong peranakan, punyalah mukim.)*

If donations were sufficient, the leaders would venture out to purchase colourful and attractive costumes for the *boria* performance at night. This performance at night attracted the audience's attention because the performers donned shiny, glittering clothes and with the special decorative colourful lights the performance comes to life intensifying its impressiveness.

Boria Muharram

Boria was known as "Boria Muharram" as it was performed during the first month of the Muslim calendar. From the first night to the tenth night the performance lasted from eight at night till daybreak as the group moved from one prominent person's house to another within the *mukim* or subdistrict. During the Muharram festival, Indian Muslims paid *nazar* (vow) at the various tombs, shrines and holy sites in Penang and participated in processions. According to Mahani Musa (2006, 91), the paying of *nazar* was customary by many Penang Malays since the middle of the 19th century. One main shrine that they frequented was the *Keramat Fakir* (the shrine of Fakir) which was located on Jalan Hatim.

The procession, referred to as the *tabut* procession, which began at one of the local mosques—the Rope Walk mosque (Pintal Tali mosque)—journeyed through the major roads in George Town (Mahani 2003, 24). *Boria* troupes which were scattered about in the city centre joined the Muharram procession after roping in members in the vicinity. The increasing number of *boria* troupe members and spectators caused a massive congestion on the roads. The procession culminated in a "*Mandi Karbala/mandi tolak bala*" (a cleansing bath to deter misfortunes) which usually ended up in fights (Mahani 2006, 91). These fights, mostly through *pantuns*, were between *boria* troupes in the Muharram celebrations who were heading towards rivers near their villages to cleanse themselves and opposing *boria* troupes who were waiting for them (Mahani 2006, 91). The pushing of the losing team into the river by the winning team marked the end of the celebrations.

According to Pieries (2009, 166), *boria* troupes which were scattered throughout the city "claimed various audiences before joining the main Muharram procession". Group identities inscribed in the recited verses demonstrated the "significance of place" such as *kampung* (village), street, *mukim* (subdistrict) as well as the "cultural or character trait of a chosen 'nationality' such as Arabian, African, Albanian or Moroccan" etc. (Pieries 2009, 166). To Fujimoto (cited in Pieries 2009, 167), this transformation from a "religious to a theatrical performance was symptomatic of its Malayanisation". Below are some of the *boria* verses and their translations which were provided by A. W. Hamilton (see Pieries 2009, 167).

Malay thieves on English Land
Wearing black trousers and white shirts
The Malays can do any work
They can make this nyior (coconut) orchard beautiful.

*(Pencuri Melayu di tanah Inggeris
Memakai seluar hitam dan kemeja putih
Orang Melayu boleh membuat apa kerja sekali pun
Mereka boleh mencantikkan kebun nyior ini.)*

*Soldiers from Yunnan and Kuan Tong are the same
They left China
Came out to find riches (make a living)
This is a safe and perfect place for them.*

*(Askar dari Yunnan dan Kuan Tong serupa sahaja
Mereka meninggalkan negara Cina
Datang ke sini untuk mencari kekayaan (bekerja)
Ini merupakan satu tempat yang selamat dan sempurna untuk mereka.)*

The first verse is an example of a parody by a *boria* troupe from Dato Keramat Road. In this verse, members dress up as Europeans and jokingly refer to themselves as Malays who have stolen English land. In the second and third verses, *boria* troupes from McAlister Road and Padang Garam (Kimberley Street) "express alternative national and cultural loyalties to Albania and to the triads from Yunan and Kuan Tong (Kwantung), but nevertheless affirm their satisfaction with their new geography" (Pieries 2009, 167).

During the final night on the tenth, all the groups from various districts would congregate at the central point in town, for example the *Wembley Park* (Hamima Dona Mustafa 1973). Here, the best *boria* group for the year will be chosen. Hence, an audience could watch as many as 40 groups with 40 different stories which catered to every type of emotion. Consequently, the final night marked another significant event and this was the faction feud between *Bendera Putih* and *Bendera Merah* (the White flag and the Red flag).

Faction Feuds

The origin of the feud was from the secret societies, the Ghee Hins and the Tua Peh Kong. The Ghee Hins (Cantonese/Teo Chew Group) belonged to the "White Flag" while the Tua Peh Kong (Hokkien) belonged to the "Red Flag". The most prominent faction fight took place in Penang in the year 1867. The secret societies were established mainly to provide protection to gang members and to obtain mutual benefit. The members of the groups were ethnically diverse as they comprise the Chinese, Indians (Muslim and Hindu), Malay and Jawi Pekan members. It was possible for the Chinese triads to spread their influence to the other races as they were living in the same vicinity and also because of

intermarriage between the Chinese and local Jawi Pekans. Naturally, this in turn gave rise to feuds between the Malays from one faction to another.⁵

According to Mahani (2006, 92), *boria* troupes representing the Red Flag included Boria Mukim Jelutong, Boria Kampong Pinang, Boria Bagan Jermal, Boria Jalan Bahru, Boria Hutton Lane (now Jalan Hatin), Boria Sungai Gelugor, Boria Kampong Rawana, Boria Kelawei, Boria Gedung Rumpit (now King Street), Boria Kampong Ambun (now Penang Road-Northam Road), Boria Ujung Pancur (now Transfer Road-Northam Road) and Boria Argyll Road. While *boria* troupes representing the White Flag included Boria Titi Papan (now Penang Road-Chowrasta market), Boria Padang Garam (now Carnarvon Street-Kimberley Street), Boria Tanjong Tokong, Boria Air Itam, Boria Kampung Jawa, Boria Kebun Dodol, Boria Kebun Lama, Boria Kampong Makam, Boria Kampong Kolam, Boria Jalan Sampah (now Acheen Street), Boria Lorong Takia (now Ah Quee Street), Boria Kampong Lada (now Armenian Street), Boria Pintal Tali and Boria Bakar Bata (now Brick Kiln Road).

It was not just Malay-Muslims who enjoyed the *boria* performances but Europeans and Chinese as well. Rich Malay-Muslims and rich Chinese *towkays* became patrons of *boria* troupes as funds were needed to absorb the troupes living expenses etc. In return, performers eulogised their patrons through their *boria* verses. To Mahani (2006, 93), it is quite possible that these patrons "were leaders of secret societies who were still active despite government controls". According to the author's oral source,⁶ on the eight night of *boria*, sparks of fight (*Bunga Gaduh*) were sensed as the *boria* groups from both sides provoked one another through their verses. On one occasion while a group was playing, another group from the opposing faction sounded the bugle. This was meant to unnerve the performing group and to signal to the feuding faction to stop playing and to meet somewhere for a fight. The climax of the final fight was an open physical brawl between the two factions which escalated into serious violence causing the colonial government to impose a ban on the *boria*.

The feuds continued year by year and at one point the Malay Muslim leaders as well as religious leaders became concerned with the continuous rift and disunity between the Malays. Among the leaders were Hj. Ahmad bin Abdul Kadir (otherwise known as Hj. Ahmad Teko), Mohd. Yusuf Sultan Maidin and Syed Almashoor. Hj. Ahmad Teko preached widely about the ill-effects and disadvantages of this shameful phenomenon in mosques while Mohd. Yusuf published pamphlets urging the Malays to unite, criticising in the process the various *boria* groups for inciting anger and encouraging enmity between one another. In a later paper, Mohd. Yusuf Sultan Maidin accused the *boria* for denigrating the Arabs and for encouraging behaviour that was contrary to the teachings of Islam. Almashoor resorted to writing in the newspapers to express

his anger and contempt at this feuding. These opinions, suggestions and initiatives were received with mixed feelings; in response some *boria* groups composed verses jeering the critics (Hamima 1973).

End to Faction Feuds

In 1929, a general meeting was held where it was resolved that these factional feuds be put to an end. *Mukim Jalan Baru* under the leadership of Syed Deget was responsible for carrying both the Red and White Flags representing the two factions. They performed a *boria* performance based on this tragic event and enacted the ill-consequences that would ensue and soon the flags were burnt symbolising the end of their long-established enmity, as confirmed by the author's oral source.⁷ In the composition of the *boria*, the first significant verse contained a useful piece of message which ended the enmity. It was also a plea to the Malay-Muslims to unite, religion being the binding factor. This is clearly illustrated in the verse below through the use of inclusive pronouns such as "we" (*kita*) with the ethnic group "Malays" (*Melayu*) and the direct reference that is made to "Islam". Note also the "significance of place", "Jalan Baru" as a marker of identity and group affiliation and solidarity. Because there were several *boria* troupes, it was important for them to identify themselves through naming their *kampung* or *mukim*. For instance:⁸

*We Malays exchange greetings
Play according to Islamic rules
Stars and Moon's rays shine the universe
Jalan Baru the key to knowledge.*

*(Kita Melayu memberi salam
Keluar bermain nasihat Islam
Bintang bulan penyuluh alam
Jalan Baru penyuluh Kalam.)*

During this auspicious moment too, it was unanimously decided that the *boria* should not be performed in the month of Muharram. This decision was made because the month of Muharram should be spent in remembering and praying for the grandsons (Hassan and Hussain) of the Prophet and not to create gaiety, fun and joy as they had sacrificed their lives for the sake of the Muslim faith. Hence, with respect shown to the holy month of Muharram, the *boria* performance began to be performed during other months, as stated by another oral source.⁹ Because of the possible threat of violence, in the 1930s *boria* teams were closely monitored as they had to report to the Crime Investigating Department before any public performance. Permission to perform was only granted after a trial run at the police headquarters grounds in Penang Road (Hamima 1973).

From *Boria* to *Ria* and Back to *Boria*

There were few *boria* performances during the Japanese Occupation and they were normally held during auspicious occasions such as the Japanese Emperor's birthday. However, these performances were played in enclosed areas like a hall in *Wembley Park* as a precaution against air raids. In 1945, a meeting was initiated by Sungai Pinang subdistrict and all groups resolved that they would not perform until the Malayan Union was abolished. This was an interesting development as far as the *boria* was concerned, as it symbolised the unity of *boria* troupes, apart from strengthening their core identity as Malay-Muslims, as the Malayan Union was very much opposed by the latter since it threatened their status quo and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers. In 1948, another meeting was held at Dahrul-Alam Football Club (DAFC) in Sungai Pinang with the aim of changing the name of *boria* to just *ria* which seems more appropriate as the word *ria* connotes fun and gaiety.

According to author's oral source,¹⁰ on 1 February 1948, the various groups performed and competed at the Dato Keramat Field (or known more specifically as Padang Brown) between eight at night and four in the morning. It witnessed the participation of about 23 United Malays National Organization (UMNO, the dominant Malay political party) branch-groups, and in this competition the best *Tukang Karang* (composer) was judged. This sort of practice of having *boria* competitions is carried on up to this day but since the 1970s, *boria* began to receive patronage and financial help from UMNO Youth organisations which acted as the intermediary between state departments and the *kampung* people (Rahmah 1987, 12). This signalled the intervention of a dominant political party in *boria* performances and the gradual change of *boria* from a simple Malay folk theatre to an important "Folk Media" as it began to be used by the powers that be as a channel to transmit "social awareness of national development plans" (Lent 1978, 145) and, also, to inculcate a sense of Malaysian nationalism. It was through this medium that the government was able to conscientise the public, in particular the rural folks, of the benefits of national policies on their socio-economic and political development and well-being. From 1952 onwards, all *ria* performances were enacted in Padang Tambun (Lorong Kulit). *Ria* started from eight at night and ended into the wee hours of the morning. However, after Malaya achieved its independence, performances were rescheduled and they took place between 8 at night to 12 midnight. In 1957, when Malaya was granted its independence the *boria* underwent significant changes and the name *ria* was changed back to *boria*.

***Boria*: Penang's Unique Malay-Muslim Cultural Heritage**

Boria is not only associated with Penang, but, more importantly, it is identified with the Penang Malays, mostly *Jawi Peranakans* mainly because *boria* strongholds were found in predominantly Malay *Jawi Peranakan* areas such as in the villages of Sungai Pinang, Kampung Dodol, Kampung Jawa, Dhoby Ghaut and Jalan Hatin, all within the Datuk Keramat area, south of George Town (Rahmah 1987, 3). *Boria* activities also spread to Air Itam, Jelutong, close to Datuk Keramat and to other areas outside the island such as Province Wellesly, Kedah and Perak. The region boasted a number of *boria* troupes: *Kumpulan Boria Sungei Pinang* (under the leadership of Pak Daud), *Ria Seni Pesaka Sungei Pinang* (under the leadership of Ba'in), *Kampung Jawa Boria troupe* (under the leadership of Abu Bakar Ghauth), and *Dental Nurses Boria troupe* (under the leadership of Syed Agil) (Rahmah 1987, 3). *Boria* enjoyed its heyday in the 1920s as there were about 80 *boria* teams in Penang then but this number had dwindled over time, leaving only four teams with 100 active members now (*Saturday Metro* 2009). *Boria* troupe members were closely knit as they were related to one another either through blood ties or marriage. They also lived close by and shared a passion and liking for the *boria*. For instance, Rahmah discovered that Pak Daud was not only known for his role in the *boria* but many of the villagers were related to him; he and his wife were distant cousins and she was also the second cousin of Ibrahim, Daud's *Tukang Karang* (leading tenor/composer). Daud's wife was the costume designer of his *boria* troupe and their son, Dzulkifli, their drummer (Rahmah 1987, 17). A similar set up was observed with regard to Abu Bakar Ghauth and his *Kampung Jawa Boria troupe* as kith and kin were involved in one way or another with the *boria* performances.¹¹ In a way, this helped to preserve *boria*, Penang's cultural heritage, as knowledge and skills with regard to the composition of lyrics, music and dance steps can be passed from one generation to another.

Performance Aspects

In terms of form and genre, the *boria* of Penang can be considered as theatre. As in the past, form-wise it consisted (till now) of two main elements, a comic sketch which is farcical in nature and a song and dance routine, with a common theme running through them (Rahmah 1987, xiv). Four to six actors perform in the comic sketch whilst the song and dance routine is led by a *Tukang Karang* and 12 sailors, who form the chorus group. Traditionally, in past *boria* performances men masqueraded as women on stage as women were not allowed to perform, however, in recent times, women have started to lead by being the main composer. It is quite a common sight now to see both men and women performing as the chorus group. A typical *boria* performance begins with a comic sketch which is then followed by the song and dance routine led by the *Tukang*

Karang. As in the past (see Hamilton 1920, 142–143), after the *Tukang Karang* sings the chorus, the whole troupe would then sing the same refrain in unison to the loudest and accompanied by a rhythmic swaying of bodies and brandishing of sticks. The composer then proceeds to sing several verses which are then followed by the chorus. The quality of the songs normally depended on the ability of the composer and the contents included phrases of welcome, thanks and complimentary remarks which were improvised impromptu and directed to the host and the various dignitaries present in the hope of receiving some kind of gift or reward in return. As soon as this is completed, the musicians start playing another piece of tune and the star performers dance or stage some acrobatic acts. This showed that patronage for the *boria* by the wealthy and powerful had begun long time ago.

Boria groups not only played at the house of prominent people but also played at Chinese and Malay Clubs. Such clubs included the Kampung Jawa Club, Dahrul Alam Club, Dahrul Makmur, Kelawei Club, Funan Frolic, Wembley Park, Anglo-Chinese School Union, Old Frees Association and Hu Yew Seah. This showed *boria*'s appeal and popularity to the multi-racial and cosmopolitan population of Penang. One major factor would be its hybridised identity which is also mirrored in its music as tunes were borrowed from modern English, American and Hindi songs. Dance was a combination of the *Malay Inang*, *Zapin*, *Joget* and *the Ronggeng*, and the Western cha-cha, tango and soul. Nothing much has changed in terms of its performance aspects as present dance forms still featured moves such as the quick step, rhumba, Inang and Zapin.

Although the *boria* is a form of theatre that is identified with the Penang Malays, it has also been staged outside Penang. What makes *boria* distinctive is the language that is used in the comic sketch by the performers. As a rule of thumb, the comic sketch is enacted, till today, in *Bahasa Tanjung* or the Penang Malay dialect. This helps to further reinforce *boria*'s identity as a unique Penang Malay-Muslim art form. The use of *Bahasa Tanjung* is also evident in the verses that are being sung by the *boria* troupe members. As an example, this is reflected in the pronunciation of words such as "*pasai*", "*basai*" and "*kasai*" in the following verse:¹²

Blame it on four digit lottery gambling
Any extras are done with
A fat body becomes ill and pale
In the past ate kurau and senangin
Now changed to kasai fish.

(Judi nombor ekor yang punya pasai
Ada saki-baki habis selesai

*Badan yang gemuk sakit dah jadi pucat basai
Dulu makan kurau senangin
Ditukar dengan anak-anak kasai.)*

Boria performances are live shows and are generally played on a raised stage. This was an innovation introduced in 1929. Before 1929, people who came to watch the *boria* performance arrived in bullock carts or horse carts. They arrived early and rolled out their mats near the performing place. With the creation of the stage, various stage rules were laid out and the performers had to adhere closely to them. This resulted in the *boria* becoming more rigid and formalised.¹³ In addition, *boria* was played in closed spaces such as Wembley Park and Padang Brown, as the authorities feared then that feuding between rival *boria* troupes would ensue if the *boria* was performed in open spaces such as the streets of George Town. Nowadays, *boria* is played in halls such as Dewan Sri Pinang, P. Ramlee Auditorium, the Penang *Pesta* (festival) site at Sungai Nibong and the Esplanade. New spatial arrangements for the *boria* brought about even greater restrictions to *boria* troupes in terms of length and duration of performance, theme of sketch and song and lyrics.

Comic Sketches and Lyrics

Essentially, there are three main types of stories in the comic sketches: domestic stories, social stories and propaganda stories (Rahmah 1987, 48). The basic theme which is still popular until today, revolves around "order and disorder", the important roles played by guardians of morality and authority to impose some kind of order on the younger generation caught in the throes of this rapidly changing modern society (Rahmah 1987, 48). Stories centre on youth versus age, old versus new, male versus female, national unity versus disunity etc. Characters comprise members of a nuclear or extended family, neighbours, Malay versus non-Malay, etc. (Rahmah 1987, 48). The comic sketches normally involved a *penghulu* (head of *mukim* or subdistrict) or learned government official who functions as the symbolic mediator between villagers and the government/outside world. The *penghulu* is respected by all. He represents both modernity and tradition; the former expressed via his dressing or attire and the latter in terms of the moral values he wants to transmit to his people (Rahmah 1987, 65). Currently, the *penghulu* of yesteryears has been replaced by smart-looking, bush-jacketed government officials. In most *boria* performances, this kind of set up is still being observed. The transmission of moral and religious values is clearly exemplified in the following verses which were sung by the *Tukang Karang* and chorus in one of the *boria* performances in the 1980s (Rahmah 1987, 138–139):

*Because the numbers gambling began
That led to conflict with Pak Long's wives
To the Tok Kadhi's house seeking divorce to settle
Pak Long cried in remorse.*

*(Kerana judi ekor mula mula asai
Dengan bini bini Pak Long dah jadi pasai
Ke rumah Tok Kadhi talak tiga minta selesai
Pak Long pun menangis baru rasa menyesai.)*

*Pak Long got advice from a friend
Told Pak Long to kick off the gambling habit
And to turn to religion before it was too late
For fear that my ignorance makes Nungkar Nangkir beat me.*

*(Pak Long dapat nasihat daripadanya sahabat
Perkara judi ekor disuruh Pak Long taubat
Disuruh buat amalan jangan terlambat
Takut tak boleh jawab Nungkar Nangkir sebat.)*

The above verses would appeal to Malay-Muslim audiences as explicit reference is made to Islam via words such as "religious judge" and "Mungkar and Nangkir". The former refers to a *kadhi* who solemnises and annuls Muslim marriages, and the latter the angels who will question and prosecute Muslims for their wrong-doings after their death. These verses also signify the importance accorded to the religion of Islam, an importance which was not observed in the early days as Malay-Muslims participated in *boria* activities such as the making of vows and by partaking in rituals that required them to carry the *tabut* (tombs) in a procession, which went against the principal tenets of Islam. Islam, in some ways, can be seen as a unifying agent as it is used to unite the Malay-Muslims by providing them a sense of collective or group identity.

Group or communal identity is also fostered through acts of naming the troupe's place of residence, such as the *kampung*, street and place of origin. This is reflected in the use of noun phrases such as *Mukim Kelawei* and *Bagan Tanjung Bunga* in the verses below (Hamilton 1920, 139–141):

*Janggi Malay Sala Malay
Catching snakehead fish in the swamps
Kelawai subdistrict is ready.*

*(Melayu Janggi Melayu Sala
Kerja menangkap ikan haruan dipaya;
Mukim Kelawei amat sedia.)*

*Habshi a primitive African
Whose job is to look for coal
In every nook and corner
Bagan Tanjung Bunga is the spot.*

*(Habshi Afrika orang ulu,
Kerja mencari arang batu,
Serata tempat tiada tentu,
Bagan Tanjung Bunga menjadi satu.)*

Because *boria* troupe members held jobs as menial workers, there is also a need to establish a sense of oneness with all Malay-Muslims regardless of class or creed. As such, an important characteristic of this evolving Penang Malay art form is the emphasis it places on the use of Quranic verses to help assert its religious identity and oneness with its audience. This is evident in the verse below which uses words such as "*Kalimah bismillah*" and "*Alhamdulillah*", a verse which is part of a *boria* song titled "*Boria Pulau Pinang*" composed by Syed Mohd Akir bin Syed Ahmad, the present leader of the Boria Anak Tanjung (Arena Kampung Melayu) troupe:¹⁴

*We begin by reciting bismillah
Alhamdulillah we are thankful
Debate on Penang is the title of our story
Boria Anak Tanjung brings forth news.*

*(Kalimah bismillah bermula kata
Alhamdulillah bersyukur kita
Debat Pulau Pinang tajuk cerita
Boria Anak Tanjung membawa berita.)*

Boria songs also underscore the importance of Malay culture and society, the need to live within one's means, to preserve traditional cultural values when faced with the onslaught of westernisation/modernisation. For instance, in the verse below, the audience is advised to stay away from a corrupting Western culture. Note the use of imperatives such as "let us", "clear" "take" and "leave", and the use of the inclusive pronoun "we" in the verse below on "pop music" (Rahmah 1987, 130):

*Let us unite in a single aim
Clear our culture of its rust
Take interest in our tradition
And leave alone the culture of the Westerners.*

*(Marilah kita bersatu hasrat
Bersih kebudayaan dari berkarat
Kesenian bangsa sendiri diambil berat
Hindarlah kebudayaan orang orang barat.)*

The theme of unity and its importance in multi-racial Malaysia which was emphasised in *boria songs* in the 1970s and 1980s is still reiterated in current *boria* numbers. This is illustrated in the verse below which is taken from Syed Mohd Akir's "*Boria Pulau Pinang*:"¹⁵

*The citizens live as a multiethnic nation
Helping each other all the time
To make contribution to do good deeds
Live in peace and prosperity.*

*(Rakyat hidup berbilang bangsa
Tolong menolong setiap masa
Menabur bakti membuat jasa
Aman damai hidup selesa).*

***Boria* as "Folk Media" and Propaganda Songs**

After independence, and with greater patronage and support given by the ruling party, UMNO and now, UMNO Youth, themes tend to promote government policies such as "The Green Book", "Our National Ideology", "The New Economic Policy", "Look East Policy", "Vision 2020", "Northern Corridor Economic Region", "One Malaysia Concept" and "Transparency, Accountability and Good Governance" are promoted. Lent refers to these songs as a form of "folk media" or "grassroots media" whose function is to promote national development policies or the government's ideology (Lent 1978, 146). To Rahmah (1987), they function as political propaganda songs and this is exemplified in the songs below, the first one is on "The Green Book Plan" and the other on "Our National Ideology". The former was part of the government's efforts in making Malaysia self-sufficient in terms of food production. In this song, citizens are exhorted to green the earth, to cultivate and grow vegetables as a way to curb inflation. Note the conflation of politics and religion with the use of words such as "Allah" and "Mohammad" as one way to procure endorsement of a

government policy from the Malay-Muslim citizenry in the rural areas (Rahmah 1987, 153–154):

*The Green Book policy is well structured
The government is ready to guide
The people should answer the call
Science and technology is the era of progress.*

*(Dasar buku hijau ampunya susunan
Kerajaan sedia memberi panduan
Patutlah rakyat membuat seruan
Sains dan teknologi zaman kemajuan.)*

*Allah has already spoken
To his last prophet, Mohammad,
That growing things strengthens the faith
And helps against inflationary threats.*

*(Allah memang sudah berfirman
Kepada Muhammad nabi akhir zaman
Bercucuk tanam meneguh iman
Tentang segala inflasi ampunya ancaman.)*

In the following song, archaic Malay political values such as "loyalty" and "obligatory followership" (see Kessler 1992; Shakila Abdul Manan 2003) to one's leader are emphasised and these are reflected in words such as "undivided loyalty" and imperatives such as "give", "follow", and "follow his direction" (Rahmah 1987, 158).

*When people follow the National Ideology
In Malaysia is peace and prosperity
Goodwill and unity is the way
Ria Seni Pesaka opens the discussion.*

*(Asallah rakyat Rukunegara
Di dalam Malaysia aman dan sejahtera
Muhibbah dan perpaduan itulah cara
Ria Seni Pesaka membawa bicara.)*

*Give your undivided loyalty
Follow directives in all matters
And the Malaysian nation will forever be great
The ruler famed in all four corners of the world.*

*(Tumpulah taat setia tak berbelah bagi
Ikutlah perintah di segala segi
Negara Malaysia tetap bermutu tinggi
Masyur perintah di alam empat persegi.)*

Boria has also been appropriated by the ruling party to eulogise Malay political leaders and the dominant political parties such as UMNO in order to further reinforce their hegemonic control and status in society. In this regard, songs have been composed to praise legendary national heroes such as Dato' Onn Ja'afar and Tunku Abdul Rahman. Such eulogistic verses are reproduced below:¹⁶

*Truly Dato' Onn is famous
From Perlis to Johore
Allah hu Rabbi Allah hu Ghafar
With his good deeds Malaysia prospers.*

*(Memang Dato' Onn orang yang mashur
Dari Perlis hingga ke Johor
Allah hu Rabbi Allah hu Ghaffor
Dengan jasa Datok Onn Malaysia makmur.)*

*Tunku was born a Prince
His strength is like steel
His face is still youthful
He can be tested in more ways than one.*

*(Tunku asal keturunan Raja
Tenaga Tunku macam waja
Di wajah Tunku masih remaja
Boleh diuji apa-apa saja.)*

Boria: Threatened with Extinction?

The *Boria* had certainly evolved from a ritualistic theatre to become Penang's unique Malay-Muslim cultural heritage. However, according to some scholars, it is threatened with extinction as it is "outmoded in character and (is) no longer relevant to Penang's modernising society" (Ghulam-Sarwar 2002). The present generation of educated Malays, products of the New Economic Policy, show a preference for other forms of entertainment such as Western drama, modern songs and dance, computer games and the internet. As such, little or no support is shown to this folk theatre. Since it has evolved into its present state, it no longer bears any resemblance to the Muslim ritualistic activity it was initially associated

with. Present-day *boria* does not commemorate the brutal slaying of Hussin and Hassan as lyrics have taken on a more secular and laudatory character.

Boria troupes, once having a strong foothold in *mukims* and *kampungs*, have been disbanded because of modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation. Many of these *kampungs* have been destroyed and replaced by flats and condominiums to accommodate the growing population in Penang. With the mushrooming of factories that provided employment opportunities and the building of affordable homes in the suburbs such as Bayan Baru, Bayan Lepas and Air Itam, many *boria* troupe members and Jawi Peranakan families uprooted themselves from their *kampungs* or subdistricts and migrated to the suburbs. As they no longer lived close to one another, they were not able to sustain their interest and passion in the *boria*. Hence, there is little opportunity to hone interest in the *boria* in the younger generation and to pass down skills and know-how to them. One of the author's informants¹⁷ lamented the fact that space and place was an issue. When they were residing in the *kampungs*, they could schedule practices anytime (since they all lived in the vicinity) and these could be held in open spaces in the *kampung*. However, flats do not provide such spaces and this affects the number of practices that they can have as they have to rent these places which is simply unaffordable. As intimated earlier on, *boria* troupe members are not high-salaried professionals but blue collar workers.

The appropriation of the *boria* by the state could also have contributed to its gradual demise as this folk theatre is tamed to serve national interests. The state had impeded its natural growth as it had taken over this folk theatre which once belonged to the people, and started imposing restrictions on it in terms of sketches that it could perform and songs that it could play. Because the state via UMNO Youth and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage provided patronage to the *boria* troupes, the latter were obliged to adhere to their guidelines. This is particularly evident in recent *boria* performances that have been staged during state-level competitions as they praised and eulogised present Malay political leaders and the ruling party. The over-emphasis on Malay patriotism and nationalistic feelings may have caused the non-Malays to feel alienated from the *boria*. The powers that be must exercise some form of restraint and not abuse or misuse the *boria* to further its own interest. In this regard, Lent's remarks are poignant as he says (Lent 1978, 158):

The dividing line between developmental, governmental and political ends can be hair thin, it is possible (and it is happening) for folk media to be misused to promote the development of national leaders, rather than the development of national policies and programs. That, indeed, would be unfortunate in a world

where governments already control so many mass media used to promote their own ends.

On its own, the *boria* could have appealed to the non-Malays, those keen to "pursue a pan-ethnic Malaysian consciousness through drama and dance" because of its multicultural and cosmopolitan identity (Wazir 2009, 56). However, this was not realised because of state intervention and appropriation.

Although the *boria's* future looks bleak, attempts have been made by *boria* stalwarts such as Omar Hashim to use technology to keep it alive. Omar had created a *warisan boria blog site* which he had launched in 2009 at the P. Ramlee Auditorium in Penang. He had posted all data and photographs of the *boria*, then and now, for public viewing and consumption. Omar was quoted in the papers to have said that *boria* was a dying art as "there is a lack of invitation for troupes to perform" and annual *boria* competitions usually held at the Pesta Pulau Pinang site have been cancelled in the past because there were not enough teams competing (*Saturday Metro* 2009).

This is an interesting new development of the *boria* as the interactive blog site could be used to transmit knowledge of the *boria* and to sustain interest in the younger generation and *boria* enthusiasts who have been dislocated and dispersed as a result of rapid urbanisation and modernity. Attempts have also been made to record *boria* skits and songs in CDs which are then sold to the public. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage should provide support and financial help to such initiatives if they are seriously interested to preserve this cultural heritage.

With the launch of an exhibition titled "Boria: A Passage through Time" held in conjunction with the month-long George Town Festival (1st to 31st August 2014), Penang's ailing *boria* was recently resuscitated and given a new lease of life. The exhibition was a follow-up to the Boria Parody Theatre or "Boria Fest" which was organised by Jawi House Production in collaboration with the Theatre Department, School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia. The hour-long play written by Wazir Jahan Karim was fully supported by Think City Bhd, the Penang Jawi-Peranakan Heritage Society (JAWI), Ikatan Kasih and the Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis (ASERA).

Wazir Jahan Karim, President of the Penang Jawi-Peranakan Heritage Society, said that the parody theatre was an attempt to promote conservation efforts "to retain part of this *boria* heritage which was originally founded in the heart of George Town. The site is now known as Jalan Mesjid". She exhorted the ministry "to relax and let the arts move to its natural course" as "[t]he arts can't succeed if it's talked down. We have to let it grow". There is also a need to provide opportunities for the younger generation of all ethnic groups to participate in the

boria as it "can bring out laughter and togetherness, and at the same time (help them) discover their hidden talents in acting, dancing, singing, composition of lyrics".¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

This paper has charted the gradual transformation of the *boria* from a ritualistic theatre to become Penang's unique Malay cultural heritage. In this regard, the paper has highlighted the factors that have helped to mould the *boria* into a ritualistic theatre, and has also delineated the features that provided the *boria* its distinct Penang-Malay-Muslim identity. Factors that have been explored include the use of *Bahasa Tanjung* in the comic sketches and songs, the religion of Islam as a binding factor, the use of the *boria* as a folk medium to transmit national policies and ideologies and the inculcation of archaic Malay political values. It ends with a discussion on factors that have threatened the *boria* with extinction and measures that have been taken to sustain it. This unique cultural heritage has been threatened with extinction as a result of changes in lifestyle brought about by modernity, urbanisation and state control. Suffice to say, the *boria* has been tamed over time, this folk medium which was used to challenge colonial rule and authority in the past is now being used as an important state apparatus to maintain the hegemony of those in power and to further reinforce Malay sentiments of patriotism. Sadly, these have caused the *boria*, Penang's unique Malay-Muslim cultural heritage, to lose its appeal with the masses, the non-Malays, in particular.

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Notes

1. A different Malay version of the essay had appeared in Abu Talib Ahmad, ed. (2012), *Utara Semenanjung Malaysia: Esei-esei warisan*. Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
2. This is based on the author's interview with Pak Kan (En. Abu Bakar bin Jaafar) in January 1979. Pak Kan, a *boria* stalwart and a famous *Tukang Karang* of Boria Sungei Pinang, passed away in 2008. The author had conducted interviews with Pak Kan, En. Daud Ibrahim and En. Abu Bakar Nyah in 1979 to gather information for her academic exercise on "The historical evolution of the *boria*".
3. Information regarding the *Kolli Kallen* was provided by another author's oral source, En. Daud Ibrahim, the then leader of Boria Sungei Pinang, in January 1979.

4. This verse was kindly recited to the author by her informant En. Daud Ibrahim.
5. This was revealed to the author in the interview with her oral source, En. Daud Ibrahim.
6. The author's oral source was En. Daud Ibrahim. Facts about the secret societies and their infiltration in *boria* troupes are corroborated by Mahani Musa in her essay, "Boria Muharam: Antara kreativiti dan realiti masyarakat Melayu Pulau Pinang abad ke-19 dan ke-20". See *Wacana Seni* Vol. 2 (2003): 28–29.
7. This information was obtained from the author's oral source, Pak Kan.
8. This verse was recited by the author's informant Pak Kan during the interview.
9. This was based on the author's interview with another oral source, Pak Nyah (En. Abu Bakar Nyah). He was also interviewed in the month of January 1979.
10. The oral source was En. Daud Ibrahim.
11. This is based on personal knowledge as En. Abu Bakar Ghauth and family members had lived a few doors away from the author's family home in George Town.
12. This verse was recited by the author's informant Pak Kan (En. Abu Bakar Jaafar) during the interview.
13. This information was provided by the author's informant, Pak Nyah (En. Abu Bakar Nyah).
14. Syed Mohd Akir bin Syed Ahmad is the leader and *Tukang Karang* of Boria Anak Tanjung Air Itam. He also acts in the comic sketches.
15. "Boria Pulau Pinang" is one of the songs recorded by Boria Anak Tanjung (Arena Kampung Melayu) in an audio cassette produced by Buluh Perindu Productions.
16. These verses were recited in Malay by the author's informant Abu Bakar Nyah.
17. The author's informant, Syed Mohd Akir bin Syed Ahmad was interviewed in July 2010 at the Astaka Air Itam, Penang.
18. Information on the *boria* exhibition and Boria Parody Theatre was obtained from following website: http://mypenang.gov.my/index.aspx?page=page-1091-boria_a_passage_through_time-1130;1091;1073;991;794;.pgt (retrieved on 26 August 2014).

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- Interview with Pak Kan (En. Abu Bakar Jaafar) in January 1979.
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- Interview with Syed Akir bin Syed Ahmad in July 2010.