

MOVING CENTRESTAGE: WOMEN IN MALAY OPERA IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY MALAYA¹

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Through *bangsawan* or Malay opera, Malay women came to prominence in cultural life for the first time ever in early twentieth century Malaya. This was a radical departure from traditional folk theatre wherein men often played the roles of women. In *bangsawan*, both women and men performed on stage together. Large numbers of women were recruited.

This paper looks at the lives of women *bangsawan* performers specifically at how they were different from ordinary women of the times and to what extent they gained some measure of autonomy. It shows how *bangsawan* women were recruited, how they acquired proficiency in their art forms, how they were viewed by the religious and socially conservative sectors of Malayan society, and their relationship with male co-performers. This paper contrasts the lives of the women with the roles they played and the images of women portrayed in *bangsawan* plays.

The research methodology involves oral interviews with women performers. To a considerable extent, I have allowed the performers to speak for themselves and have drawn from their vocabularies to capture the "voices from below". To support this oral history, newspapers of the early twentieth century and 78 RPM recordings of *bangsawan* performers were employed.

Development of Bangsawan: Continuities and Differences with Traditional Theatre

Bangsawan was one of the new cultural forms that emerged in response to rapid social, economic and political changes caused by

British colonial expansion into Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, British officers were appointed in the Malay States. Tin mines and rubber estates were opened and a modern system of communication was built to service them. Urban settlements or towns which were multi-ethnic in character began to develop. Foreign cultural forms such as the European and American operetta, revue and vaudeville, Chinese opera, and Indian Parsi theatre provided entertainment in the towns (Tan, 1993: 8-16).

It was in the midst of these social political changes and exposure of the local population to foreign cultural activities that a new form of theatre called *bangsawan* (literally "nobility") emerged. *Bangsawan* combined elements of western and traditional theatre and was the common local theatre for different ethnic groups living in Malaya. It was the first indigenous theatre in Malaya which used the proscenium stage that was modelled along Western lines. The stage setting was of the drop and wing variety. *Bangsawan* engendered the development of the first Malay orchestra which incorporated western instruments and the first Malay popular music in the country. *Bangsawan* was commercial in nature and was constantly innovating to suit the changing tastes of the audience. A "typical" performance featured a full-length play with instrumentally accompanied songs and music and interludes called "extra-turns" in between the acts. These "extra-turns" consisted of orchestral music, songs, dances, comedy and novelty acts from a variety of sources including Western theatre and vaudeville. Stories of different national or ethnic origins such as Malay, Hindustani or Arabic fairy tales, Chinese romances and even Shakespearean tragedies were performed.

As in traditional theatre, the majority of the plays revolved around the lives and loves of fairy-tale kings and queens. These plays were not scripted. Even though some contemporary plays which were not based on mythical kings and princes were adapted, these were in a minority.

All *bangsawan* stories focussed on love, marriage, how a king should rule justly and the protection of the kingdom against outside forces. There was emphasis on romantic love, marital fidelity and the victory of good over evil.

Stock characters used were similar to those in traditional theatre and consisted of fine (*halus*) characters like the hero (*orang muda*), heroine (*seri panggung*), and king (*raja*); and coarse (*kasar*) ones like the villain usually acting as a pirate or spirit (*jin*), and the clown (*pelawak*). Other minor characters included the queen, officials, warriors, maids and villagers. Each character had specific functions and roles and wore standard costumes.

Roles played by Women - Continuities with Traditional Theatre

Women were portrayed as refined princesses, queens, comic maids or village women in *bangsawan* stories centred around the aristocracy. These characters corresponded to stereotypes of women shown in traditional theatre. Through the characters, the audience was familiarized with the accepted mode of conduct and behaviour in Malay society. The female characters indicated the correct way for women to treat one's elders and one's husband.

As in traditional theatre, the heroine portrayed the ideal aristocratic lady -- one of fair delicate beauty, possessing the qualities of pristine goodness, meekness, humility, patience, refinement and inner beauty. At some point or other, she had to undergo suffering and face trials and tribulations. In times of emotional crises, lengthy laments were made by the heroine. She sang in sobbing fashion to arouse the sympathy of the audience. For instance, in the *bangsawan* version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the heroine Ophelia was delicate, good, meek and refined. She suffered a great deal and was said to "sob...quite a lot" and "imported a pathos into her parts". She was knocked and spat at (*Times of Malaya*, 11 Jan. 1912; *Straits Echo*, 14 Nov. 1908).

In another story *Jula Juli Bintang Tiga* (The Third Star Jula Juli), the heroine Jula Juli had to suffer and was forced to separate from her husband and child through no fault of hers. Briefly, the story is about a princess who comes from the heavens to look for a husband. She finds the Sultan of Zamin Tawaran's ring and agrees to return it if the Sultan marries her. But he must not ask for her name or her

background. The Sultan agrees, they get married, and she bears them a son. After a few years of marriage, the Sultan changes his mind and asks for her name so that he can introduce her to his guests. As soon as she reveals her name, she has to return to the heavens.

The heroine was faithful in love. She had unequalled powers of resistance and an inflexible attitude to chastity. When faced with an open attack on her chastity, she had to die. In the legend from Langkawi, the heroine Mahsuri is killed as she is wrongly accused of having an affair with a warrior when her husband is away fighting enemies who were attacking the nation. However, to show that Mahsuri is innocent, white blood flows when she is stabbed. She then puts a curse on the island -- that it will not prosper for seven generations.

The heroine's role was to be totally devoted to her family. She had to obey her parents even in the selection of marriage partners. Sometimes she was given a choice but her parents must agree to it. For example, Mahsuri has three suitors. With her father's consent, she chooses one by throwing a flower to him.

Lovers who were not permitted by their parents to marry never disobeyed but died in the end. This usually occurred in contemporary stories with settings outside the court as in *Sam Pek Eng Tai*, a popular Chinese play performed by *bangsawan* troupes. The heroine (Eng Tai) disguises as a man so that she can go to school. She meets the hero (Sam Pek) at the school and both become good friends. When Sam Pek discovers that Eng Tai is a woman, they declare their love for each other. Unfortunately, Eng Tai's parents disagree with the match and offers her hand to another rich businessman. Sam Pek dies of heartache. When Eng Tai visits his grave, the ground breaks and swallows Eng Tai.

The heroine must be supportive of her husband. When Mahsuri's husband is called to fight for the nation, she gives her full support saying:

Pergilah abang. Adik doakan semoga selamat abang pergi dan kembali. Janganlah abang bimbang. Abang berjuang di medan hadapan, adik berjuang di medan belakang. Adik akan memimpin perempuan di Pulau Langkawi ini untuk berjuang...

(Go, my husband. I pray that you will go and return safely. Do not worry. While you fight at the front of the warfield, I will fight at the back of the warfield. I will lead the women of Langkawi in the struggle...)

As in traditional theatre, other minor women characters in *bangsawan* included the queen (and mother) who was patriotic and willingly served the king, and advised her daughter (the heroine) to be faithful and loyal to her husband and father. There were also women maids who served the princess. They were often lively, good-natured, humble and had more human qualities. Very often, village women were also portrayed. They were presented with affection although their naivete and quaintness were exaggerated.

Roles of Women - Differences with Traditional Theatre

There were a few changes in the images of women portrayed in *bangsawan* compared to those in traditional theatre. Sometimes as in *Laksamana Bentan*, a more assertive type of heroine was portrayed. *Laksamana Bentan* tells of the love between princess Wan Entah and an admiral, Raja Andak. Wan Entah's sister, Wan Senari who has secretly loved Raja Andak for a long time tests the admiral's love for her sister by poisoning her. The admiral chooses to die with Wan Entah. Seeing his love for the latter, Wan Entah is given an antidote to save her life.

Wan Senari was a stronger princess who was to take over the throne when her father died. She often took over the role of her father. For instance, Wan Senari rebuffs her sister for meeting the admiral secretly in her garden:

Cis Wan Entah. Tidak disangka-sangka bagi perbuatan mu, cuba hendak menconting arang ke muka kerabat-kerabat di Raja Bentan. Sebelum duduk nak berlunjur dulu. Dari pada kamu mencemarkan nama baik keluarga Bentan, lebih baik ku radak...

(Cis Wan Entah. Your actions are unexpected, you have tried to smear charcoal on the face of the government of the King of Bentan. Before you can sit you want to stretch out your legs. Since you have defamed the good name of the family of Bentan, it is better if I stab you...)

Wan Senari's role was to set up the conflict between the hero's and heroine's love for each other on the one hand and their duties to parent and king on the other.

In a society that placed a premium on girls who were "innocent", nothing erotic was allowed on stage. Relations between sexes had to be kept "clean". However, as a result of new western-derived models seen in films and theatre, for the first time *bangsawan* heroines were allowed to hold hands with the heroes they loved while they sang love songs on stage. Such was the case when Wan Entah met the admiral secretly in her garden:

*Wahai kekanda Raja Laksamana
Lama tak datang pergi ke mana
Hati Entah gondah ghulana
Santap tak kenyang beradu tak lena*

*Aduhai adinda intan baiduri
Sebab abang tidak kemari
Menerima perintah Yam Tuan bistari
Menentang lanun musuh negeri*

*Aduhai abang Raja Laksamana
Abang pergi janganlah lama*

*Entah yang tinggal bercengkerama
Pulanglah cepat supaya bersama*

(Alas elder brother Raja Laksamana
It's been a long time since you came Where
have you been?
Entah's heart is distracted
(I) eat without being satisfied (I) rest without
sleeping soundly

Oh my sister (my) diamond and opal
The reason why I did not come
(Is) I received orders from the accomplished
Yam Tuan
To fight pirates, the enemies of the nation

Oh my brother Laksamana
Do not go away for long
Entah chats to amuse herself
Come back quickly so that we can be together.)

By way of summary, female characters in *bangsawan* stories were important only in the sphere of love and marriage which limited the scope of women's concerns on stage. The essence of the play was the selection of the right partner and the protection of the home (as emblematised by the palace against evil forces from outside). Even more assertive women such as Wan Senari and Eng Tai (who dared to impersonate a man so as to get an education) continued to be defined as supportive, obedient and dutiful daughters and wives.

Bangsawan stories and female characters reflected gender attitudes prevalent in Malay society in the early twentieth century. The female child was brought up to be a good daughter, wife and mother. This orientation was reinforced through formal education where girls were taught sewing, basketry, matting, weaving, cooking and dress making (Manderson, 1980: 103-105).

Becoming Stars - Breaking Traditional Roles

Although women played conservative roles in *bangsawan* plays, their lives were radical considering the times and the society they lived in. Paradoxically through *bangsawan*, they were afforded the unprecedented opportunity to gain self-expression in public.² In Malay village society of the early twentieth century, a young woman's movements outside the home was limited. She had to assist in the cooking and washing, take care of her younger brothers and sisters, and help in the rice fields (Manderson, 1980: 15, 16). Although women *bangsawan* performers still cooked, sewed, and took care of the children during the day, they were not at all confined to household chores and child-bearing. As Menah Yem a veteran actress puts it, "During the day, I cooked, washed clothes, and took care of the children. At night, I was free to work (*cari duit*).\" As we shall see later in the paper, *bangsawan* women created an alternative lifestyle.

Through *bangsawan*, women performers became stars (*bintang*). By this was meant a professional who worked as an entertainer. For, unlike performers of the traditional *wayang kulit* or *makyong* who usually had other sources of income such as farming, acting was a full-time occupation for the *bangsawan* performer, particularly the stars. The *sri panggung* (heroine) was a key member of the troupe; she was one of its stars. As the *Malacca Guardian* (9 May, 1932) reported, "the whole company gives way to the star, who gets a liberal sum of about forty pounds per week". It was the stars who established a company's reputation. Stars such as Miss Jacoba, Miss Tijah, Miss Norlia and Miss Maimoon were household names. These stars were not simply wives or mothers of individuals but developed their own individual personalities.

Child stars were promoted as novelties. The audience at the Kinta Opera Co. had its Miss Echon, a "nine-year-old actress" who sang English songs (*Straits Echo*, 3 Jan. 1925), while Genani Star Opera boasted of "Baby Star Miss Nani" (*Straits Echo*, 7 Nov. 1925).

What attracted young girls to join the *bangsawan* troupes? The stories related to me told of motives which were not very different from those

of young women aspiring to be actresses in the film world of today. Many came from poor or broken homes; they saw the *bangsawan* as a way to earn a living (*cari makan*). All who joined *bangsawan* were tempted by the glamour of stardom and fame which the touring companies offered.

Ainon Chik, a 68-year-old³ veteran *sri panggung* recalled that she followed her sister and brother-in-law who joined Genani Star Opera after the death of both her parents in Singapore. The sisters had no relatives to turn to. Ainon's mother was a Sarawakian Chinese while her father was a Bugis who had migrated to Sarawak. Ainon's parents eloped to Singapore because her grandparents did not approve of the mixed marriage. Ainon was eight years old then. "My brother-in-law could earn twice as much as an electrician and stage hand in the *bangsawan* than as an electrician in a private firm," she said.

Menah Yem, a well known dancer and *sri panggung* of her time, started performing in the *bangsawan* at the age of nine. That was almost eighty years ago. Menah Yem's mother joined the City Opera (owned by Ong Peng Hock) after she separated from her husband. So Menah grew up with *bangsawan* performers as her larger family. She sang in the chorus and replaced other, more experienced child actors when they fell ill.

The 48-year-old Saniah, also known as Sri Kandi on the *bangsawan* stage, claimed that she was left to fend for herself at the tender age of seven after her grandmother passed away. Both her parents were *bangsawan* performers and she was sent to her grandmother in Perak as a baby. With no grandmother to take care of her, Saniah was taken in by the Wayang Bintang Timor. She played children's parts in the plays and sang as a chorus girl during the extra turns.

Other performers grew up in the midst of *bangsawan* activity. Their parents were performers or proprietors of famous *bangsawan* companies. Minah Alias, a former heroine who is in her late sixties comes from a family of actors and performers. Her grandfather was a shadow puppeteer in Java. Her father, Nani bin Haji Omar, started off as a *dalang* and an actor in the *wayang wong* (*orang*) but joined the

opera upon the invitation of a Chinese opera owner. Nani soon became a hero and a star in *bangsawan* and was sought after by women of all ethnic backgrounds. Minah's mother, Catharine de Brish, a foreigner, was one of these women. After watching Nani's performance, Catharine de Brish fell in love with him, attending his performances every night, making eyes at Nani and throwing flowers to him after the performances. When Catharine's brother forbade her to see Nani, she fell sick. Nani and Catharine finally got married and she joined the *bangsawan*. It was inevitable that Minah, coming from such a family, was to take up acting as well.

Bangsawan women were different from other Malay women in the early twentieth century as they were full-time performers and earned an income solely as entertainers. Even though Malay women in the villages played important economic roles such as in the production of rice and crafts, these women were self employed.

At an early age, girls who joined *bangsawan* were already distinct from others of the same age who lived in the protected environment of the village. They were trained to become stars. Coming from poor broken homes or families of *bangsawan* performers, they were already earning a living and learning to be financially independent at the age of seven or eight. They also began to develop their own personalities at a tender age.

Learning to be Stars - Different Socialization Process

The apprentice learnt that to make it in the world of *bangsawan*, she had to win recognition as a star; the rewards were substantial. Stars earned more money. They were often presented with gifts or large tips by wealthy admirers. It was commonly reported that individuals in the audience would fall in love with the performers and shower gifts on them. "Lovesick youths" were known to "pass their photographs up to their favourite actress" and to throw "a good deal of money...to her on stage" (*Malacca Guardian*, 9 May 1932). If the performers were good, special honorary titles were bestowed upon them. Menah Yem was known as the "Queen of Dance"; Ainon Chik, the "Greta Garbo

of Malaya"; and Purita Clarino, the "Jazz Queen".

Initially the newcomers played small, undemanding roles. Young children were given children's or other minor parts. Minah Alias remembered her less-than-edifying debut as an actress very clearly:

It was a performance staged by Genani Star Opera, owned by Tan Kam Choon and managed by my father, Nani. I was eight years old and was very excited when I was called upon to replace Ainon Chik who was sick. I was to be a "jungle child" in the play "Ginufifa". To my dismay, the leaves with which I was covered were full of ants. I was feeling so itchy that I forgot my part. Instead of pulling the antelope's tail, I pulled his horns. The head came off and I fell (*Star*, 15 Dec. 1984).

If the young recruits proved themselves to be good, they could sing or dance in the extra turns. Minah Alias was praised for her efforts in the turns at a performance in 1925 (*Times of Malaya*, 13 Oct. 1925):

Miss Nani [Minah Alias], the four year old daughter of the stage director [Nani], was the first to give an extra turn. Her song and dance were charmingly performed. Later she gave another turn during which she forgot a part of the words but achieved a triumph with her winsome smile.

Ainon Chik also started her career performing as a singer and dancer in the extra turns. She recalled singing songs like "I wanna go where you go" and "You were meant for me." She also acted children's parts in stories like "Musalma" and "Jambatan Patah".

Consequently, the apprentices had every reason to persevere, observe, learn from the side-wings every night and strive to become stars. They had to diversify their interests and familiarize themselves with all

the roles, songs and dances. According to Ainon Chik, she used to sit by the side and observe the more experienced performers. During the day, she studied Malay, Western, Chinese, Hindustani and Arabic songs, Malay dance and *kuntau* (Chinese art of self defence using sticks), and *adat istiadat* (rituals) of the Malay court from the other performers. "We also watched Hindustani movies, observed and imitated the dancing and singing," Saniah continued.

Minah Alias and Saniah made clear that *bangsawan* roles were committed to memory, there being no scripts to study. Before any new or major play was performed, the director would call all the actors and actresses together, narrate the story to the cast, and then assign each role. It was left to the performers to improvise the dialogue and the accompanying actions, relying only on their ingenuity (*kebijaksanaan*). Through these improvisations, women performers learnt to be more articulate.

Strict discipline was the rule. Typically, after lunch the apprentices would practise dancing and singing with the other leading actors and actresses till about 5 o'clock. After a short rest, a bath and a meal, they would prepare for the evening's performance.

Some of the more fortunate or promising ones were sent to Indonesia for their apprenticeship. Minah Alias, for example, lived in Java and studied dance, music and acting with the famous Miss Riboet for ten years. The training was demanding and rigorous. Waking up at five in the morning to jog, she also was required to attend to some household chores. At 1 o'clock, the practice sessions began at which Minah Alias learnt Balinese dances, folk dances, and dances of the *kraton* (palace). At night, she performed with the Miss Riboet Orient Opera.

For the child apprentice, formal schooling was an irregular matter. As the troupes were always on the move, there was scarce opportunity for the children to register in any school. It was pointless anyway, for they would move in a matter of weeks to another town.

Female apprentices were indeed different from ordinary village girls who helped in the house and sometimes went to school. Instead, *bangsawan* apprentices practised singing and dancing and learnt how to act different women's roles during the day. They were called upon to dress up, sing and act at night. They went through a different socialization process. *Bangsawan* was both school and life for those who came to it as children and young women.

Bangsawan women were in a sense freed from the constraints of the daily lives of other Malay women but they were confined by a new set of rules. They had to adhere to strict discipline and rigorous training besides attending to household chores. Nonetheless, *bangsawan* women had more avenues for self-expression than *kampung* women. They were constantly learning new songs, new languages, improvising new dances, mixing with other ethnic groups and travelling throughout the peninsula and neighbouring countries. All this opened their minds.

Maintaining Star Status: Adaptability and Creativity

It was no easy matter to maintain one's star status. The stars were prodded on by competition and rivalry. Minah Alias remembered her mother telling her that "if you want to be good, you must have the ambition to be better than your friends."

In order to compete, stars had to keep up with the changing tastes of audiences. Menah Yem, known to her admirers as the "Queen of Dance", learnt the latest vaudeville dances from dancers who were brought over from the Philippines, and she and her Filipino dance partner, Henry, would study dances like the rumba and samba at screenings of foreign films, later including these in their acts. Demonstrating the rumba to me, Menah Yem remembered with pride that she and her partner were up-to-date in their knowledge of dances, executing them faithfully. "As a result, we were so popular that if we did not appear at least three times in a performance, the audience would shout "*pendek-panjang, pendek-panjang* (short-tall, short-tall)". (This referred to the fact that Henry, her partner, was tall and she was short).

Performers who had acquired star status felt that they owed it to themselves to constantly improve their skills in singing, dancing, and the art of self-defence. Minah Alias recalled studying *kuntau* from a Chinese opera actress even after becoming a star, and in return, she taught *silat* to the opera actress.

As professional actresses, bangsawan performers had to learn to forget themselves on stage. Performers had to cry during sad scenes, Menah Yem said, and if real tears did not flow, they had to dab oil on their faces. Menah Yem herself was particularly convincing in the role of a wicked step-mother: "Once, someone in the audience became so worked up when I beat my step-daughter with a broom and broke a plate on her head that she shouted, 'Are you an animal?'".

Women performers had to learn songs and dances of different ethnic origins in order to create an interesting and appealing heterogeneity -- interesting and appealing to their heterogeneous audience. The following advertisement illustrates the variety of songs and dances presented in just one night. New songs were continually introduced.

The Kinta Opera Co.:

Miss Meda, our famous Prima Donna will sing Che Mamat War Wear and Arab song (Yamallah)

Miss Anong, our beautiful actress the Nightingale of the Opera World will sing nightly the popular Bercherai Kasih and the latest Egyptian song and dance.

Miss Soadah will sing Mak Enang Sayang and the latest best songs.

Miss Rowna will sing new Slendang Mayang and dance the latest Siamese dance.

Our famous actress, Miss Meda, Miss Chik, and Miss Itam, will dance the latest (Japanese) Kapary Dance.

Our latest Spanish Dance with handling umbrellas and the latest Gambus, Miss Meda, Miss Anong, Miss Soadah and Miss Itam...(Straits Echo, 27 January 1925).

Women in *bangsawan* also had to fascinate the audience with novelty acts and different spectacular scenic effects and settings for each performance. Actresses were reported to make "torn up paper turn into flames" and produce "silk handkerchiefs from their empty fingers" (*Straits Echo*, 8 October 1906). On another occasion Dean's Opera staged a "wonderful display of feats and strength" by a famous Indian stage and film actress, Miss Anarkali. She "support[ed] a big stone on her chest and allow[ed] another stone to be broken on top" (*Straits Echo*, 26 Nov. 1932). Nooran Opera showed "a woman floating in the air" during one of its performances (*Straits Echo*, 21 July 1933).

Unlike other women of the times, in order to maintain star status, *bangsawan* women were competitive. They tried to be better than other actresses by constantly exposing themselves to new dances and songs of various ethnic origins, learning these dances and songs quickly, developing their stage roles, improvising dialogues and introducing novelty acts and tricks into their performances.

Compared to *kampung* women, *bangsawan* actresses acquired knowledge of a wider world as they constantly interacted with performers of different nationalities such as Filipinos, Indonesians, Eurasians, Chinese, Indians and Arabs who were also employed in *bangsawan* troupes. Malay women also watched foreign films and theatrical performances constantly so that they could learn and adapt their dances, songs, novelty acts and tricks.

Exposure to foreign performers and performances helped *bangsawan* women to be more multi-racial in their approach. As they actively learnt from performers of other ethnic backgrounds and were more appreciative of non-Malay cultures, they promoted the interaction of foreign and indigenous music and dance in *bangsawan*.

Prejudices Offstage

Women in *bangsawan* were viewed by some sectors of Malayan society, especially the religious and socially conservative, as women of loose morals. They bore the stigma of women who dressed up and

paraded themselves to be ogled by men, who worked at night, and who seemed to be changing spouses ever so often. Many village elders accused *bangsawan* women of impiety, not praying and not reading the Koran.

Because scandals often occurred, prejudices against actresses remained in certain circles. According to the veteran actor Pak Suki, his wife Saadiah (a *bangsawan* heroine) gained a measure of notoreity by running away with a member of the audience. At Batu Pahat, one important local official apparently adored Saadiah so much that he wanted to see her on stage all the time. "When I appeared, he tried to chase me off the stage and took a shot at me with his pistol," Suki said. Suki had to flee to Singapore where he joined the Genani Star Opera.

Another performer, Miss Jahara, was taken to court as she did not return jewellery and costumes which she borrowed from Wayang Comedy India Ratoe before she joined Wayang Kassim. It was reported that Miss Jahara:

...was charged at the instance of Syed Ali with criminal Breach of Trust in respect of one American gold coin with silver chain attached and two gowns amounting altogether to \$35.60...The defendant was employed in the company at the salary of \$40 a month. Upon joining she received an advance of \$120 which she agreed to pay off by monthly instalments of \$6 (*Straits Echo*, 4 Dec. 1906).

To what extent the women performers were loose women and impious Muslims is not clear. The performers themselves claimed that the social prejudices were not true. In fact, they adhered to strict discipline. Women stars had to be aware of their conduct and personal behaviour on stage and off. They had to follow many rules which curbed their personal freedom. Performers could not go in and out of the house they shared without the permission of the manager. They were not allowed to gamble or drink liquor (Edrus, 1960: 65). They could not meet men backstage. Saniah asserted that they prayed five

times a day. "There was a religious teacher living with us. Our children studied the Koran when they were not acting. Those who were good entered Koran reading competitions."

The point I wish to make here is that *bangsawan* women were different as they created controversy. The misconduct of actresses was more noticeable than that of women in other professions. To a certain extent, their lives were public property and their shortcomings were put on public display.

Community Integration - Interdependence of Women and Men Performers

Mutual help and fellow-feeling arose among female and male performers because they were away from their families in the *kampung*. Having to travel long and sometimes hazardous journeys by sea also brought them close to each other. Among themselves a camaraderie was fostered as they were dependent on one another for survival.

Not surprisingly, therefore, *bangsawan* performers came to regard the troupe they were members of, as a substitute family. Living in a *rumah kongsi* (shared house), they cooked and ate together and shared food, water and facilities. They addressed each other as *mak* (mother), *pak* (father), *kak* (sister), *abang* (brother) or *adik* (younger brother or sister), as they would in their *kampung*. They gave each other nicknames which captured the individual's specific characteristic qualities. Menah Yem was nicknamed "Menah Ketok" (Short Menah) because she was short. Alias Manan was called "cikgu" (teacher) as he used to teach the children in the troupe to read.

New recruits were adopted as *anak angkat* (adopted children). The practice of adopted-parenthood ensured that the children were taken care of -- important because many of the recruits were young and living away from their immediate families and *kampung* for the first time. Aion Chik recalled fondly that her adopted father (who happened to be Minah Alias' real father) treated her like his own

daughter. Very often, the manager/director was both teacher and father to the children.

The performers comforted each other in times of trouble, especially when there were deaths. The death rate among babies was particularly high. This was because there was often no proper medication available, especially during long tours overseas. In addition, it was common for women to perform right till the day they gave birth -- with deleterious consequences for the health of their babies. Aion Chik, for instance, had sixteen children, eight of whom died in infancy. Saniah had twelve children, four died.

Male performers also helped women actresses who were harassed by Japanese officials during the Japanese Occupation of the Malay Peninsula in 1942. For instance, while Minah Alias was performing with the Grand Nooran Opera, she was saved from the advances of a Japanese official by another *bangsawan* performer, Alias Manan. Ever since that incident, Alias had walked with a limp as his leg was injured during the struggle with the Japanese official. Minah and Alias were married in 1942.

Performers endured hardships together. Living conditions were makeshift. "When the rain came, the roof would leak, the stage would leak, we had to run hither and thither. Still, we were satisfied with our lives," Minah Alias and Aion Chik said. For Menah Yem, the memories of her early years are fond ones. It was, she recalled, "enjoyable" (*seronok*), a time when she was happy. "We were like one big happy family."

Women performers could always rely on the *bangsawan* community for emotional and financial support should the men in their lives desert them or die. Among themselves there was no prejudice against divorcees. In fact, women themselves were in a position to initiate divorce or separation. According to Aion Chik, if a relationship soured the couple usually separated by mutual agreement.

Unlike other women of the times, *bangsawan* women had a community of performers to turn to in times of trouble. Members of

this community took care of each other. A camaraderie developed. The troupe became a substitute family for members who were away from their real families.

It must be stressed that although camaraderie existed, male-female relationships among the members of the troupe were not necessarily equal. Women still performed the housework and took care of the children in the *rumah kongsi*. Their movement outside the *rumah kongsi* was restricted.

Conclusion

Bangsawan stories fostered the notion that love and marriage were synonymous with women and their concerns. Women characters were subdued, meek, refined, faithful in love, obedient and totally supportive of their parents and husbands. Occasionally when a more assertive princess appeared, she too idealized the concepts of duty and obedience.

Although *bangsawan* women played demure, duty-bound heroines on stage, the stories of their lives show that they broke from tradition and foregrounded themselves in early twentieth century Malayan society. It can be claimed that *bangsawan* women had a career as we would understand it today. Women stars were professionals who worked solely as entertainers; were known for the specific roles in which they specialized; were constantly learning new songs and dances of different ethnic origins; were entrepreneurial and competitive in their outlook; and were sensitive to the changing tastes of employers and audiences.

Bangsawan women created an alternative lifestyle. They were no longer associated with daily life in the *kampung*. They had a different routine: household chores in the morning, dancing and singing practices in the afternoon and performances at night. Although they were looked upon with suspicion by some, they were licensed to act in ways normally prohibited for women such as parading on stage and

allowing men to cast amorous glances and whistle at them. Women in *bangsawan* travelled constantly, and learnt from and mixed with performers of different ethnic origins. Through exposure to foreign cultures, they gained knowledge of a wider world and promoted the interaction of various cultures in *bangsawan*.

Did *bangsawan* women gain some measure of autonomy? It cannot be denied that women performers still operated within a male-controlled framework. *Bangsawan* directors/managers who were mainly men chose and conceptualized plays. Women were still responsible for child-care, cooking and cleaning in the *rumah kongsi*. They were not free to go in and out of the *rumah kongsi* without the permission of the director/ manager.

Nevertheless, women performers enjoyed a degree of autonomy within the *bangsawan* community. Even though plays were conceptualized by male directors, women performers participated in the process of putting together productions. Women were called upon to improvise dialogues in plays, to organize make-up and costumes, to choreograph dances, to sing and to train less experienced dancers and singers.

Women in *bangsawan* also developed personalities of their own and were known by their own stage names rather than as wives of village men. They were identified by the specific roles in which they specialized. Honorary titles such as Queen of Dance or Jazz Queen were given to some. Others were known for their ability to perform illusionary tricks on stage.

Women performers had a greater measure of choice and control over their own lives compared to other *kampung* women. They had a choice to work outside the family home. Many performed in *bangsawan* as they found satisfaction from acting and from the limelight they received. They were given the opportunity to develop skills in singing and dancing and liked the challenge of expanding their knowledge and competing with other performers. Glamorous star actresses commanded adulous audience attention and high performance fees.

Additionally, women in *bangsawan* could choose their own marriage partners. *Bangsawan* actresses often married fellow *bangsawan* actors or musicians. Marriage to performers gave legitimacy to a career as a performer and allowed women to continue performing after marriage.

Women performers were also in a position to initiate divorce or separation if their marriages did not work out. They were able to support themselves and their children financially as they earned a wage and were not totally dependent on their husbands for money to run the household.

Finally, *bangsawan* women were also adept in changing with the times and in so doing continued to maintain autonomy and control of their own lives. The following case of Ainon emphasizes this important point. During the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, women performers such as Ainon adapted to new circumstances. They learnt new Japanese songs and dances, assumed Japanese names and performed for the Japanese to earn food and obtain medicine. Ainon had to change her stage name to Lei-ko. "The Japanese drilled us and made us practise Japanese songs the whole day. At night, we performed for the Japanese troops," she stressed.

As *bangsawan* declined in the 1950s, *bangsawan* performers turned to the film industry. *Bangsawan* actresses became heroines in films while *bangsawan* dancers were employed as choreographers. Working for the film companies ensured regular, monthly salaries, bonuses, social security and annual leave. By comparison, their incomes as *bangsawan* performers depended on the evening's takings. If they did not go on stage, they were not paid.

Performers who could not make it in the film industry would turn to other forms of entertainment. Ainon herself quit *bangsawan* and joined a *joget moden* troupe as a dancer and singer in the 1950s. In fact the *joget moden* troupe paid her better. Consequently, she settled down in Kuala Lumpur with her daughter. However, whenever *bangsawan* troupes came to Kuala Lumpur, she sang and danced in the extra turns.

Today, in her seventies, Ainon lives by herself in a hut with her cats and chickens in the compound of her son's bungalow. "I have been independent all my life," she emphasizes.

Notes

- ¹ A version of this paper was presented at the workshop on "Performing Arts in Southeast Asia", Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, Leiden, 6-10 June 1994.
- ² Although women danced the leading roles in the makyong theatre, this was an exception. In outlook the makyong actresses were not entrepreneurial. The makyong was a regional art form and was often performed for spiritual purposes (Ghulam 1976: 51, 92, 93).
- ³ Ages of personalities referred to are as at the time of my field research in 1986.

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Mak Marshita (born 1923, *bangsawan* heroine), Singapore, 7 January 1987.

Mak Menah Yem (born c. 1915, *bangsawan* heroine, also known as "Queen of Dance", married to the deceased proprietor of the Grand Nooran Opera, Pak Yem), Kuala Lumpur, 16 April 1986.

Mak Minah Alias (born c. 1921, *bangsawan* heroine, married to Pak Alias), Penang, 27 July 1986.

Mak Saniah or Sri Kandi (born 1938, *bangsawan* heroine), Kuala Lumpur, 21 February 1986.