

# *Saba* Social Theatre: The Solution to the Conflict of Supernatural Characters as a Healing Process

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This study explores the conflict solution of supernatural characters in *saba* social theatre as a healing process. A qualitative method using an ethnographic approach is applied to explain the association between behaviour and culture. Referring to the field of cosmology, the universe has unravelled all the things that happen in the physical and metaphysical worlds, and that is asserted by human existence. Creativity in the production of human arts results from a relationship between humans and the universe, reflected in the existence of the cosmological relationship of the artist and their religious beliefs. This is also related to four cosmic elements: land, water, fire and wind. The work of art is also believed to have its own soul. The supernatural conflicts in the *saba* social theatre are examined to expose the existence of the physical and metaphysical cosmos underlying the world views of the *saba* ritual practitioners as a form of social theatre for healing. The *saba* social theatre players experience a trance as an indicator of the embodiment by the players of the supernatural characters during the performance. Offerings are also served in an effort to summon the supernatural characters in the performance. The aim is to separate the players' personality from the embodiment of the supernatural characters who are in conflict. The embodiment is manifested through cosmic symbols in order to execute the healing process.

**Key words:** *Social theatre, saba, supernatural characters, conflict, healing.*

## Introduction

*Saba* performance is a form of ritual that connects with the religious rituals practised by Malays since the era of animism. It is a set of symbolic behaviours including worship, sacrifice and prohibitions. Ritual comprises a human effort to release one's desire to be in contact with supernatural entities, in keeping with the natural tendency of human nature to have some religious emotions. The ritual performance is the process yielded from the human

desire to connect with the metaphysical world due to humans' tendency to have religious sentiments. Thus the ritual performance is an event that comes from the action and the desire to connect with the supernatural creatures for certain purposes, such as asking for good things, peace and the prosperity of the practitioners (Mohd. Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2009).

The ritual also connects with the aspect of existence and the cosmos of humankind. This refers to cosmology involving discussion of the metaphysical and the physical worlds as well as the positions of humans. The connection between them creates a sense of creativity and capability for humans to produce works of art. This is also related to the four cosmic elements: land, water, fire and wind. The work of art explains the artist's cosmological religious beliefs. Referring to the theory of cosmology, a work of art is believed to have a soul (Mohd. Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2009). From this belief, humans also realise that their existence is determined by the existence of supernatural creatures other than humans, which has both positive and negative impacts on human existence. Other negative effects include disturbances such as diseases – either mental or physical. In relation to this, ritual performance attempts to heal diseases by obstructing the negative effects from continuing to ruin people's lives. Through the ritual, humans believe that a positive aura can be generated.

A belief in religion and mythical things is the metaphysical aspect that can drive humans to achieve transcendental truth. This is because both aspects have been able to motivate and inspire humans to try to understand and explain the physical world. The *saba* social theatre has been created as a result of this unwavering belief. Those in the community of social theatre practitioners believe that their physical world will also be influenced by the metaphysical world. This is where the supernatural creatures – their ancestors – live. From this belief, offerings are prepared as part of the performance of the *saba* social theatre. The purpose is to respect and seek the truth from the supernatural creatures so their actions will be blessed, especially in an effort to survive diseases from which they have been suffering.

## **Methodology**

This research applies a qualitative method by using ethnography as a strategy. Ethnography was founded by anthropologists wanting to concentrate on the relationship between behaviour and culture. Ethnographers try to understand and separate the *emic* perspective from the *etic* perspective. *Emic* means explaining a cultural phenomenon through the perspective of the society. *Etic* explains a cultural phenomenon through the individual perspectives that are not involved in the society being studied. Thus ethnography is an effort to describe a culture. According to Malinowski (2002), the purpose of ethnography is to understand the views of the natives and their relationship with life, and to obtain their opinions on their world. Culture is found in diverse patterns of behaviour related to the patterns of the community being studied. Therefore, when doing a field study, an

ethnographer examines a culture using three sources: the people's perspective, how they react and the various artefacts used. The purpose of ethnography is to learn about how to obtain knowledge encompassing observations, the theory of ethnography and various cultural descriptions. It also aims to develop a systematic definition of each human culture from the perspectives of the people who have learned that culture. Due to this, ethnography has made contributions that include cultural Bound theory and grounded theory, understanding a complex society, understanding human behaviour and finally having the ethnographer work together with informants to produce a cultural description.

The researcher maintains that the ethnography method as convention in the research discipline of arts and culture seeks to elevate the objectivity of the observation. In general, the arts tend to lean more towards subjectivity; however, this means the arts are not academic and can be explored in a more flexible way. As the academic requirements are objective, the elements of subjectivity have to be minimised. Ethnography works to minimise this subjectivity. The aspects mentioned include the arts and culture, the language and the field research, the informants and the research steps, which include deciding on the informants, interviewing them, making ethnographic notes, asking descriptive questions, performing interview analysis, making domain analysis, asking structural questions, making taxonomy analyses asking contrast questions, making component analysis, finding cultural themes and writing ethnography.

A literature review was carried out prior to this study to gain an understanding of when the next stage of the research should be done and what it should involve. Information about the research was gathered and filtered to obtain data that could be applied or that supported the research. Understanding is very important to formulating site research so the right information can be gathered. On-site research can be done using two methods: observations and interviews. These make up the qualitative method, which requires the researcher to be in the study area for the time stipulated; it is considered appropriate for this type of research. The researcher conducts the research on site.

The *saba* social theatre performance by the practitioners and the crowd took place in Kampung Teluk Belanja, located in Jengai, Hulu Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia. The interview method was used to obtain the information directly and easily from the informants. The interview method adopts two techniques: focused and group interviews. Both techniques support the information obtained during the observation method. Interviews focusing on individuals involved the *saba* social theatre players. The head shaman, known as the *ibu peduan* or Mak Zah, was interviewed to obtain in-depth information about the study. The information obtained was filtered before analysis to ascertain the suitability of the analysis technique. Video and voice recording equipment was utilised fully so the information gathered could be manipulated effectively.

## Analysis and Discussion

The exploratory study of the *saba* healing as a form of social theatre was carried out in Kampung Teluk Belanja, located in the district of Jengai, Hulu Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia. The site study entailed viewing the *saba* social theatre led by Che Wan Norsaidi binti Che Wan Abdul Rahman, better known as Mak Zah. She is the *ibu peduan* who plays the musical instrument *anak umban*, and also the head shaman during the performance. The *saba* social theatre performance was created in conjunction with the name of a tree named *saba*, which is believed to have been grown in the gods' playground. The gods are summoned to bless the *saba* performance in order to aid the healing process. Thus their place has to be prepared: this is in the form of a playground, as found in the fantasy world. The *saba* tree found there is the favoured tree of the gods, so it has to be replicated on Earth. It is believed that they will not come down to Earth to bless the performance or help in the healing process if the *saba* tree is not present. Thus the *saba* tree is the most important item prepared for the performance of the *saba* social theatre.

### *The Saba Ritual as Social Theatre*

According to Turner (1975), the concept of social theatre refers to an emerging form of drama, which has responded to the conflict that happens in society. The *saba* ritual was carried out as a human action to resolve society's conflict and crisis, which manifests as disease. This stems from the belief in the good and evil supernatural creatures among the practitioners so the resolution is manifested through the *saba* ritual. Referring to the definition, the *saba* ritual is the social theatre. Both have special characteristics, which result in conflict and subsequently lead to crisis.

The crisis in the community of the social theatre practitioners happens due to the conflict that happens between the good supernatural characters and the bad supernatural creatures manifested during the performance of *saba* social theatre. In terms of the performance, the actors are *ibu peduan*, the second shaman, with the patient and the crowd present. The ability to cure diseases. The healing method is based on the principle held by the particular supernatural creatures or shaman involved. Healing in *saba* social theatre is categorised as *faith healing*, which refers to a ritual practice that relates to religious belief. Healing is believed to take place because the power of the supernatural creatures involved in the ritual implementation acts as an *intervention* in the healing process. At the same time, the involvement of all *saba* practitioners in the ritual is an *intervention* to heal diseases. Due to this, it is categorised as *communal healing*.

*Saba* social theatre is believed to have emerged in Terengganu during the transformational era of Hinduism-Buddhism-Islam in the Archipelago, around the thirteenth century.

According to narratives, around 150 years ago, *saba* social theatre was introduced by a female shaman named Tok Bomoh Comot. She then taught this social theatre to Tengku Yem, who introduced and spread it to the district of Hulu Dungun, which is the village of Kuala Jengai. The effort to spread *saba* social theatre was continued by Che Wan Muda Dewa and Che Wan Deraman Cabang. In 1956, the responsibility of continuing *saba* social theatre was shouldered by Che Wan Abdul Rahman, the father of Che Wan Norsaidi (Mak Zah). Mak Zah is the only inheritor of *saba* social theatre who is still alive; she lives in the village of Kuala Cengai, Terengganu (Che Wan Norsaidi binti Che Wan Abdul Rahman, 2014).

She became involved in the performance of *saba* social theatre as a dancer in 1970. From an early age, Mak Zah had been exposed to *saba* social theatre and often followed her father, who was a *peduan* (*Bapak peduan* is the name of a man shaman, whereas *ibu peduan* is for the female counterpart) in the performance, whether to cure patients or simply for amusement. In the performance, the *peduan* acts as a head of the shaman who plays the musical instrument of *anak umbang* while reading chants to cure diseases. The *peduan* will communicate with the second shaman, who is possessed by the embodiment of Dewa Awang Muda Diawan during the *saba* social theatre performance while being ushered by the gods of the fantasy playground into the world. The *peduan* also plays a role in controlling the gods, who possess the second shaman to communicate with the *peduan*. Other than that, the *peduan* takes care of and controls the communication between the physical and the metaphysical creatures so that the relationship between the two is not cut off to ensure ritual existence.

Early on, Mak Zah was only interested in becoming a dancer, and had no interest at all in playing the musical instrument *anak umbang* (*Peduan*), which she had never played. However, Mak Zah's change of interest happened after the passing of her father, due to two factors: first, because there was no one else to play the *anak umbang*; and second, because she had the genetic qualities required to become skilled at playing the *anak umbang*. Che Wan Norsaidi binti Che Wan Abdul Rahman (2014) explains that at one point she was asked by the villagers to present a *saba* ritual theatre performance to heal disease. Mak Zah refused because she never learned or been taught by her late father to become a *peduan* (head of the shaman), who requires the skills of controlling and playing the *anak umbang* to facilitate the process of healing. The villagers ceased asking her to perform *saba* social theatre for healing.

However, not long after this request, something strange happened to Mak Zah. She heard someone playing the *anak umbang* while she was busy doing some housework. When she paid no attention, the sound vanished. But another time, while relaxing, Mak Zah suddenly had the urge to play the *anak umbang*, so she took it and plucked the strings softly. Strangely, this produced a very melodic sound. Engrossed with the phenomenon, suddenly Mak Zah had mastered the *anak umbang*. She was only 13 years old at the time, and she no longer refused

when people requested her to perform *saba* social theatre, whether for healing or for entertainment. Her role in the performance also changed from being a dancer to the head of the shaman who plays the *anak umbang*; she became known as *ibu peduan*.

### ***The Embodiment of the Supernatural Conflicts from the Fairyland***

Embodiment means someone or something that represents a quality or an idea. The embodied or the embodiment refers to the psychology and the philosophy that bring two meanings. The first is known as *embodied cognition* (referring to the embodiment of the mind thesis), which is a position in the cognitive science and in the philosophy of the mind that stresses the role played by the body in forming the mind. The second is *embodied imagination*, a form of therapy and creativity related to dreams and memories. Meanwhile in physical theatre training, the embodiment process focuses on the specific part of the *psycho physical* of the actors, whose training is based on embodying the mind thesis, seeking to unite the separation of the body and the mind (Clark, 2008).

The role of the ‘actors’ or ‘players’ in the ritual performance often involves them trying to disentangle themselves from their own personality. For example, players are often required not to play the character of the god, the supernatural or mythical creatures, but to take in these characters – that is, become the characters – in an effort to embody them. In *saba* social theatre, the embodiment of the supernatural creatures can be done by donning a proper costume, mask or makeup. Through this, the personality of the players will be segregated and the players will be able to embody the characters of the supernatural creatures from one generation to another in the same way. The main players involved in embodying the supernatural creatures’ characters in the *saba* social theatre are the head of the shaman, which is the *peduan (ibu peduan)* and the second shaman (normally a male) (Mohd. Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2015).

The role of the second shaman is to become the mediator by embodying the characters of the supernatural creatures through his body; the creature is known as Dewa Awang Muda Diawan to communicate with the *ibu peduan* (head of the shaman) to identify the medicine that can cure the disease. As the *ibu peduan* plays the *anak umbang*, the second shaman is possessed or embodied by the supernatural creatures, which are the gods of the other realm, the elysium or the fantasy playground. The communication between the second shaman and the *ibu peduan* uses language that only they can understand, which is the language of the supernatural creatures that come to possess their bodies. The role of *ibu peduan* is then to translate their conversations for the crowd, using language that everyone can understand.

### ***The Conflict Manifestation of Creatures' Characters in Saba Performance***

The performance begins with the ritual called *buka balai* (open arena), which is carried out in the patient's home. *Balai* is the space where the healing process is done. The condition is that the *balai* must be a closed space and it cannot reach the ground, as it is in the living room or the bedroom. The event called *buka balai* is led by the *ibu peduan*. The ritual begins by closing four corners to prevent the disturbance of evil supernatural entities during the healing process. The four corners represent the cosmic symbols of the land, water, fire and wind. After the ritual ends, the musicians arrange their musical instruments (such as the drum, *gong* and the smaller drum) in their respective locations on the floor. After all the musical instruments are arranged, the musicians take their places together with the *ibu peduan* while bringing the *anak umbang*. After taking her place, the *ibu peduan* will first smother the musical instrument with incense before playing the song *bertabik*, which is also an opening song of *buka balai*. After the song is played, dancers will go into the performance area accompanied by the song *burung baniung*, played by the *ibu peduan*.

The whole performance takes place through rhythmic communication in the form of chants between the *ibu peduan* and the second shaman possessed by Dewa Awang Muda Diawan, the head of the gods and goddesses, who interacts with the *ibu peduan* through the body of the second shaman as the medium. Dewa Awang Muda Diawan, embodied by the second shaman, also communicates with the *saba* tree to determine the medicine that works for the patient. Dewa Awang Muda Diawan is also the representative of the gods and goddesses who alternately use the body of the second shaman as the medium to embody their presence and communicate with the *ibu peduan* to explain the cause of the disease, the type of medicine required and the medicine that can cure the disease. The interaction between the *ibu peduan* and the second shaman possessed by Dewa Awang Muda Diawan occurs through some rhythmic chants and body language, together with the music from the *anak umbang*, which is played throughout the healing process. If the song and the music stop during the performance, the healing will be considered to have failed, and the healing ritual will need to be repeated from the start by following the conditions decided by the supernatural entities.

Throughout the ritual, the *ibu peduan* also controls the second shaman possessed by Dewa Awang Muda Diawan. Meanwhile, the patient receiving the treatment will sit on the floor with their feet pointing towards the *saba* tree. The food *kapal ayah* prepared in the tray will be placed next to *ibu peduan*. Other items used for healing include water, beras kunyit, *tolok belang* (flower petals), *batang chalung*, bezel, *seludang gading* and *lancang pilang* (the ship).

After the ritual, the *ibu peduan* will bathe the patient with the food *batang chalung* and *air pemulih*. *Mayang pinang* will be peeled by the *ibu peduan* to identify the type of disease. After it has been identified, the *ibu peduan* will spread the rice on the floor. The scattered rice

will be picked up and selected by the *ibu peduan* to feed the patient as medicine, based on the suggestion given by the supernatural entities. After the whole ritual of healing ends, the second shaman embodied by Dewa Awang Muda Diawan will lead the ritual *tutup balai* by bringing down the *saba* tree and cleaning the space using the offering *timba tasik*. The offering *lancang pilang* will be filled by the second shaman with *komor berdarah* (bezel), *buah jitung* (bezelnut), *sekaya mak jung* (nipa cigarette), *genut roti* (bread flour), *bunga kembang*, *seri lica* (cooking oil) and *kalbuq* (flower water). When all offerings have been gathered, the second shaman will keep the *lancang pilang*, *saba* tree and *timba tasik* afloat in the river during the day.

### ***The Solution for the Supernatural Conflicts***

The lives of the *saba* social theatre practitioners are in the forests and the river is their main source of life. This also influences their belief system and their cosmology, which is based on animism. At this point, the practitioners believe that there are keepers or guardians among the supernatural entities or the gods and goddesses who watch over every corner of the universe led by Dewa Awang Muda Diawan, who lives in the fantasy playground. These gods and goddesses are believed to be able to bestow prosperity, peace, sustenance and everything good in this world. Nonetheless, the supernatural creatures can also bring evil in the form of hardship or disease if they are not respected. Cosmologically, the creatures represent four cosmic symbols – land, water, fire and wind – to ensure the balance of existence. Referring to *saba* social theatre, the supernatural creature Dewa Awang Muda Diawan is the guardian of the fantasy playground that represents the symbol of the wind, which is hot and humid. The offering *anak hujan* (*timba tasik*) represents the symbol of water, which is cold and damp. The character of the supernatural creature Dewa Anak Tedung is fierce, hot and dry, representing the symbol of fire whereas the supernatural creature Awang Mihad Gembala is the symbol of the land, which is cold and dry. Thus the social theatre practitioners use the strength of this universe to manifest the relationship between humans physically and metaphysically. The main strength in the relationship is the practitioners' belief in the gods and goddesses who are the caretakers of the four cosmic elements. Thus the physical and metaphysical relationships need to be safeguarded because the entities in the universe are in need of one another – especially humans, who seek help from the supernatural creatures in their lives.

Stemming from this belief in the supernatural world, *saba* social theatre is performed as a form of communication between humans and the gods for the purpose of healing. In the traditional belief system, the disease experienced by humans is caused by an imbalance of the cosmic elements in the human body. Thus, through the healing method of *saba* social theatre, *ibu peduan* and the second shaman will call upon the supernatural creatures that represent the cosmic symbols. In this process, the internal and the external cosmos will fight against the

element of evil that disturbs the patients. The effort made by the social theatre practitioners in the healing process seeks to first look into the disease experienced by the patient; second, to know the cause of the disease; third, to identify the type of supernatural creature that is disturbing the patient; and fourth, to suggest the medicine that can heal diseases.

Referring to the offering made in the performance, the *saba* tree is a symbol that represents the four cosmic symbols: the land, water, fire and wind. This is because the *saba* tree is the place where the gods gather and come down from the fantasy playground, bringing with them two elements, positive and negative, and also communicating with the *ibu peduan* through the second shaman to heal patients. Thus the *saba* tree is the small cosmos created by these creatures in the physical world to be inhabited by the supernatural creatures from the metaphysical world. The *saba* tree is also equipped with the offerings named *timba tasik* and *lancang pilang*, both of which represent the symbols of the water and land. The offering *kapal ayah* is formed in the shape of a ship that contains various types of delicacies and this represents the wind. At the end of the ritual known as *tutup balai*, all the offerings including the *saba* tree will be cleansed using the offerings named *timba tasik*. The cleansed offering will be put into the *kapal ayah* to be floated into the river or the sea together with the diseases and negative elements suffered by the patient.

With regard to the animism that forms the basis of *saba* social theatre, the universe, humans and performance form an organic union that possesses some cosmic spirit, which unites everything. In this relationship, the cosmic spirit shifts from the physical and the metaphysical worlds into the human body (*ibu peduan*, the second shaman and the patient) until the performance heals the disease. Through *saba* social theatre, the cosmos of the universe and the performance unite until it manages to create aesthetic beauty. This also refers to the internal and the external concepts of human existence as a form of cosmos. The human's outer body is the external cosmos, whereas the human soul is the internal cosmos. Nonetheless, an important thing for a religious life would be the inner peace that depends on the wellbeing of the inner cosmos. This also influences the wellbeing of the human's external cosmos, which depends on the animistic religious belief of the social theatre practitioners.

## Conclusion

*Saba* social theatre is a combination of acting, singing, dance movements, music and characterisation. The opposition between the supernatural characters – good or bad – will create a conflict and crisis that make up a similarity between *saba* as a ritual and *saba* as social theatre. In a traditional way, *saba* social theatre is a performance for healing based on animism and a belief in the existence of the supernatural creatures in the metaphysical world. Individuals able to get close to, and communicate with, the supernatural creatures are regarded as special humans because they have the ability to cure diseases inflicted by the



supernatural creatures. The embodiment of the supernatural creatures' characters plays an important role in *saba* social theatre because it is the communicative code that can be practised by the players, especially the *ibu peduan*, the second shaman and the crowd in identifying the ideas behind each incident. Through the embodiment of the supernatural characters, the social theatre practitioners are trying to get to know their world and justify their social lives, physically or spiritually. They also know about the order of the universe and the idea of existence, as well as the meaning of power, sustenance, time and space, good and bad, heaven and hell, and life and death. Indeed, the embodiment of the supernatural characters through the bodies of the *saba* social theatre players is a meaningful and symbolic utterance, which is so powerful that diseases can be healed through *faith healing* and *communal healing* as the *intervention*.

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