
From Boorish Bands to Community Voice Tools: Transformation and Acceptance of *Boria* in Penang in Early 20th Century

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Penang-specific popular entertainment form *boria* to trace the process of integration of Muslim communities of mixed Indian and Malay descent, known as Jawi Pekan, into the Malays in Penang. Introduced to the Malay Archipelago via India, Islamic martyrdom plays developed in Penang by the end of the 19th century as *boria*, a popular entertainment characterised by its improvised lyrics, drama, and band performances. Early *boria* was considered a ritual for Indian Muslims living abroad but was not popular among the Malays. Some Malays called for the abolition of *boria* citing constant fights between bands, even though *boria* was considered a celebration for Malays in Penang in the early 20th century. This article examines attempts to make *boria* respectable and acceptable to society. Based on articles published in 20th-century newspapers, this article demonstrates that the society began accepting *boria* following the organisation of competitions and performances at commercial amusement parks and state ceremonies.

Introduction

The Malays are distinguished by two conflicting characteristics—specifically, hybridity and purity of blood—that make their origins a subject of academic and social interest. In his study on the origins of Malay nationalism, William Roff (1967) unveiled the existence of the right-wing

faction, mainly royalists, and the left-wing group comprising socialists and Islamists in the early 20th century.

Roff's study on Malay nationalism, which covers the period before the Second World War, leaves an unresolved issue: despite the anti-colonialism and class struggle embedded in early Malay nationalism, Malay political leaders who spearheaded the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 belonged to royalty or accepted royal authority. This has left scholars pondering why early Malay nationalism—characterised by anti-colonialism and class struggle—has faded away.

Ariffin Omar (1993) traced the ideas and movements of left-wing leaders to highlight their vision of the Malay nation, though he noted that right-wing leaders assumed control of the political process after left-wing leaders were forced to leave the national political scene after mass arrests by the colonial government in the early 1950s. Ariffin's theory elucidates left-wing leaders' loss of influence at the time of independence, yet leaving a scope of explanation for the popular support of right-wing leaders.

Anthony Milner (1995) employed the method of intertextuality, arguing that discursive competition between diverse positions, including those of the right-wing and left-wing, shaped the public sphere in Malaya. Milner's work has paved the way for research on the formation of a common consciousness through literary sources from classical literature to 20th century periodicals; however, the question remains regarding how to capture the consciousness of a public that had distanced itself from print information.

One reason for the inadequacy of these studies to capture the divergence of ideas and behaviours between the leadership elite and masses can be attributed to their over-reliance on literary sources, an attitude that can be traced to Roff's work. Using Roff's research framework, they emulated Roff's strategy of capturing Malay nationalism, with a bias towards Singapore.

Singapore was the hub of print media in the Malay world in the early 20th century, when Islamic reformist ideas were brought in from the Middle

East and disseminated to surrounding regions. As Roff’s study relies heavily on Malay publications in Singapore, it fails to equate non-Malay print media and non-literary information sharing and exchange of ideas through oral and physical expression that occurred in other regions, such as Penang. With extensive exposure to religions, ideas, and art forms brought from South Asia, Penang provides a diverse perspective that tends to perceive Islam as unitary through its ties to the Middle East¹⁾.

Malays in Singapore had a strong tendency to recognise clear ethnic boundaries between Malays, Arabs, and Indians among Malay-speaking Muslims. By contrast, there was a mindset that placed less emphasis on ethnic differences among Malay-speaking Muslims in other parts of Malaya, particularly Penang. However, Roff did not positively evaluate such ideas. When places other than Singapore are mentioned, Roff emphasises the context wherein their mixed-race origins were criticised by ‘true Malays’ or ‘pure Malays’ in other parts, predominantly Singapore.

For example, regarding Pen Friend Brotherhood (Persaudaraan Sahabat Pena, PASPAM), an early inter-State Malay organisation established in Penang in 1934, Roff’s study, which highlights the ethnic integration of Malays, emphasises that its Penang leadership was mixed Malay and, therefore, repelled by ‘pure’ Malays from other States, failing to fully consider the significance of the organisation in developing the perception of the Malay population’s diversity.

Jawi Pekan, *boria*, and Malay nationalism

This article draws attention to a community named Jawi Pekan, a term used by the Malays and British, often with derogatory connotations, for Muslims of Indian and Malay descent and their descendants living

1) For the study that reconsiders the history of Islam in South-East Asia from a different perspective from that of the Sunni Islam, the sect with which the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia identify themselves, see Feener & Fromichi (2015).

predominantly in urban areas of Penang. 'Jawi' is a Middle Eastern term for individuals and products originating in Southeast Asia, which—when brought to South East Asia—was understood by which foreigners within the Malay Archipelago could mix in. (Laffan 2003,13–14).

Jawi Pekan existed as an individual category in the first population census of the Straits Settlements, which included Singapore, Penang and Malacca, in 1871. However, it disappeared from the population census categories after 1911 (Hirschman 1987) because most members of the group had registered themselves as Malays (Fujimoto 1989,ii), probably in the wake of the definition of Malay in the Malay Reservation Enactment in 1913 that 'a person belonging to any Malayan race who habitually speaks Malay or any Malayan language and professes the Moslem religion' (Khoo 2014,127).

However, the incorporation of Jawi Pekan into the Malays was not as smooth as expected. Whether Jawi Pekan were included as Malays was often a subject of controversy, and such disputes were prevalent as late as 1931 (Yamamoto 2023). Jawi Pekan was frequently translated as Bazaar Malays, which was tinged with the meaning of being a half-breed and, therefore, inferior to 'pure Malays'. This preconception was exacerbated by the fact that Jawi Pekan was generally understood as linked to criminal behaviour. Jawi Pekan appeared in the English daily in Penang exclusively in articles on crime and court cases, indicating that the British perceived them as criminals; this practice continued until the late 1910s (Yamamoto 2023).

In recent studies, the term Jawi Pekan has been replaced by Jawi Peranakan, in line with Helen Fujimoto, who supplanted the pejoratively-used Jawi Pekan with the relatively value-neutral Jawi Peranakan when citing historical sources in her study²). By utilising Jawi Peranakan, Fujimoto omitted the perspective of the relationship between Jawi Pekan and Malays, which resulted in subsequent studies relying on Fujimoto's work to a

2) To be fair to Fujimoto, the same can be found in the work of Judith Nagata, who preceded Fujimoto's study.

decontextualised description of the association between Jawi Pekan and Malays.

To elucidate the time-consuming negotiation that Jawi Pekan were incorporated into the Malays, considering the evolution of the position of *boria*³⁾ in Penang—initially considered a practice by alien Jawi Pekan and known today as Malay folk performing arts in Penang—is relevant.

This article traces the development of popular entertainment *boria* in Penang in the first half of the 20th century and, accordingly, reframes an ethnically-mixed Malay concept developed in Penang during the rise of Malay nationalism in Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s.

Research on *boria* began as a performing arts study⁴⁾ and was subsequently part of historical studies to trace its religious origins and transformation. As the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated expeditious exchanges between South Asia and the Malay Archipelago, promoting commercial cultural exchanges in urban areas where immigrants gathered. South Asian Parsi theatre troupes were active in Straits Settlements, such as Singapore and Penang, and the ethnically-mixed population contributed to the development of art forms in this field (Putten 2015). Originating from Islamic martyrdom plays, *boria* was brought to Penang via India and became popular in urban Penang by the end of the 19th century and, later, changed its character from martyrdom plays to folk or local performing arts⁵⁾.

The bearers of *boria* have transformed during this process. Early *boria*

3) It was spelt differently in the literature as *boria*, *borea*, *boriah*, and *boreah*. In this article, it is spelt *boria*, except where it is used in the original text in quoted passages.

4) Rahmah Bujang documented the form and content of *boria* based on a survey that he conducted in 1975 (Rahmah 1987).

5) Mahani Musa argues that *Boria* Muharram, which began as a form of religious ritual, eventually turned into a cultural activity by showcasing artistic creativity in all aspects of performance (Mahani 2003, 19). Wazir Jahan Karim argues that *boria* is significant because it demonstrates the secularisation of rituals that move with multicultural identity and intermarriage (Wazir 2009, 52). Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, who discussed the influence of Islam in *boria* and related Malay theatre, presented outlines of some typical stories and elucidated how it was accepted into films and other media (Ghulam-Sarwar 2010). Shakila Abdul Manan discussed how *boria* evolved from a ceremonial theatre to a unique Malay-Islamic cultural heritage in Penang (Shakila 2016, 25).

was predominantly practised by members of a community derived from the union of Indian men and Malay women in urban areas of Penang, known as Jawi Pekan. Initially considered by the Malays as a practice of immigrant debauchery, the perception of *boria* transformed from an alien Indian Muslim ritual to a local Malay performing art; in the 1940s, *boria* became closely linked to Malay nationalism, though the association between *boria* and Malay nationalism has not been fully explored⁶).

Shakila Abdul Manan (2016) discusses how *boria* evolved from a ritual theatre to a unique Malay–Islamic cultural heritage in Penang. Shakila presents a selection of notable *boria* lyrics, demonstrating how *boria* bands resolved their internal conflicts and united under the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay political party founded in 1946, though he does not extensively describe *boria*’s development in the first half of the 20th century.

Wazir Jahan Karim (2018)—in a detailed discussion of the reception of *boria* in Penang in the 19th century—highlights how Muslim martyrdom plays were transformed into parody theatre by Muslim communities in the Malay world, in terms of decontextualising religious experience. However, with the exception of a reference to the abolition of *boria* from the 1920s, the evolution of *boria*’s position between the 1920s and 1940s, including the discussion regarding its abolition or acceptance, has not been exhaustively addressed.

Jan van der Putten (2015) proposes two critical points that provide a background to the covert links between *boria* and Malay nationalism. Putten criticises Fujimoto’s study of Indian Muslims in Penang, stating that the observations are not based on sufficient contemporaneous sources. Further, he criticises preceding studies for overemphasising the violence that frequently accompanies *boria* and downplaying *boria*’s social and

6) Some studies have indicated that *boria* began prospering and receiving state support under UMNO (Rahmah Bujang 1987), but what is mentioned there is from the 1960s onwards, with limited information mentioned up to the 1940s.

commercial factors⁷⁾.

Contemporaneous information regarding *boria*'s development in the first half of the 20th century is scarce, with existing studies focusing exclusively on critical moves against *boria*, such as the publication and distribution of a booklet calling for its abolition in 1922. To compensate for the limited material available for content analysis because *boria* is an improvised play, the author uses articles from Straits Echo and *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* (hereinafter *Penang Gazette*)—two English-language dailies published in Penang in the first half of the 20th century—to trace the transformation of perceptions of the carriers of *boria* from alien Indian Muslims to local Malays⁸⁾.

Straits Echo (published 1903–1941) was an English daily published Monday through Saturday by a Chinese printing company in Penang⁹⁾. It had a circulation of 750 in 1910, which increased to 8,000 by the 1930s. The editorship was held by British nationals, except for a short period of substitution, though articles critical of the British and colonial government were also published. In 1931, Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, a Sri Lankan, was appointed editor (in office 1931–1941), making him the first non-white editor of an English language newspaper in Malaya. Besides the editor-in-chief, the rest of the staff were Eurasians, Chinese, Malays, Tamils and Singhalese. It published information on the activities of Chinese and Muslim organisations through articles, advertisements, and readers' letters. Readers' letters were written by various ethnic groups living in Penang and neighbouring states and frequently generated cross-newspaper controversy

7) Anoma Pieris characterises Muharram as a 'Muslim–Indian festival' and considers it a meeting place for convicts and immigrant settlers in the Straits Settlements, which regularly developed into riots between communities. Pieris argues that the fight between communities in *boria* is not directly confrontational, but a struggle over space that rewrites space in a different imagination against colonial urbanisation (Pieris 2009, chap. 6).

8) When indicating the source, *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* is abbreviated as PG and *Straits Echo* as SE.

9) The character of The Straits Echo is discussed by Lewis (2006). See also Bilainkin (1932) and Saravanamuttu (1970), memoirs by the editors.

owing to their opinions on articles in other English-language and Malay-language newspapers.

Penang Gazette was predated by the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* (founded in 1803), the first English-language newspaper in the Straits Settlements, which merged with the *Straits Chronicle* in 1838 to become the *Penang Gazette*. It had a circulation of 650 in 1910. The board of directors included members of the Penang Chamber of Commerce. The daily gained recognition for representing the interests of the European commercial community in Penang (Shinozaki 2017, 42–43).

In addition to analysing the controversy surrounding *boria* in print, the article also examines the development of *boria*, including performances at state ceremonies such as coronation, and *boria* competitions in commercial amusement parks in the 1930s. The implications for context of the shift from street to stage wherein *boria* were performed will also be considered¹⁰).

***Boria* in Penang: from martyrdom drama to street bands**

Boria derives from an Islamic martyrdom drama. The tragic martyrdom of Husayn (Hosain), grandson of Prophet Muhammad, occurred in Karbala on the 10th day of the Muharram month in the 61st year of the Hijrah (680 AD). Poems were recited in memory of Husayn's martyrdom during the Muharram month, and religious plays were performed re-enacting the event in various parts of the Muslim world.

This practice—also brought to the Malay Archipelago¹¹)—is understood to have been introduced and established in Penang by the mid-

10) Mohd Anis Md Nor—discussing the development of *boria* and related theatre from the aspect of dance—noted that *boria* began being performed in the 1920s and 1930s on temporary stages built on empty drums or on tree trunks in the four corners, arguing that this represented the upbeat mood and attitude of Penang urbanites who saw the emergence of a new urban popular culture (Mohd Anis 2003).

11) The expenses for the ceremony of Husayn's martyrdom were borne by the Siamese monarch (Ghulam-Sarwar 2010, 94). For a complex historical trajectory of Muharram rituals in Bengkulu, Sumatra, see Feener (2015, chap. 11).

19th century through soldiers of the Madras Regiment¹²⁾, and spread among these soldiers, prisoners from India, and children born to them with local Malay women. In the month of Muharram, amateur bands were formed in each mukim (district) and street, which visited wealthy houses to perform, earning an honorarium to cover the cost of visiting the inland river to purify themselves on the 10th day of Muharram. These bands or performances were called *boria*.

An article recalling *boria* in the late 1880s, comparing it to *boria* in 1922, provides an insight into early *boria*, which did not have a conductor, used simple costumes, and refrained from using loud instruments, such as drums¹³⁾. The *boria* bands stayed for about 15 minutes in each of the houses that they visited, singing mournful songs based on historical martyrdom and reading lyrics in a melancholic tone. The lyrics fundamentally pertained to Husayn’s martyrdom. The march was accompanied by shouts of ‘Hassan, Hoosain’. Indian regiments in Penang at the time also participated in the march. This lasted for three days, and it was not linked to the Muharram ritual. No fights between bands were witnessed.

The Muharram mourning rituals were eventually lost by the late 19th century, and *boria* was transformed into a money-making event without any religious affiliation. No precise information exists regarding how and when this transformation occurred, but according to one recollection, school students on McAllister Street in Georgetown, Penang, formed a band and sang English songs—such as *Yankee Doodle went to London*, a popular song at the time—and performed European dances during Muharram in 1888. The students collected a considerable amount of money from the audience, and numerous similar bands were formed in the following years, including

12) The theory was first advanced by Houghton (1897), who wrote that it was brought to Penang in 1845. Subsequent studies have accepted that explanation, though some studies have suggested that *borias* were in place before 1845 (Wazir 2018).

13) This article—written in 1922—is written as a recollection from ‘35 years ago’, which corresponds to 1887.

non-Muslim bands. In addition to singing and dancing, plays with fight scenes were performed by the bands (SE 4 Sept. 1922,4).

These bands began wearing eye-catching and eccentric costumes, and the composition of the bands and structure of their performances eventually standardised. The bands had a lyricist called *tukang karang*, who improvised lyrics and guided other performers. The formulation was described in *Straits Echo* of 1905 as follows: notably, the author of the article refers to the bearers of *boria* as Malay, but they actually were Jawi Pekan according to the 'pure Malays', and as it would be discussed later, this had caused frustration for those who self-identify as 'true Malays'.

'Some of the fun-loving Malays form themselves into companies of strolling actors to visit, during the night, the residences of the rich, one after another; this form of celebration continuing every single night for the first ten days of the new year. Each of these companies or troupes has fifteen to forty people, amongst whom may be three or four females, who are all gorgeously arrayed in theatrical or fancy costumes. Their performance generally includes recital by one of the party of some tale of heroism, the first stanza of the lyric being taken up, after each verse, as a chorus by the rest of the company, who also accompany the singing with various musical instruments, prominent amongst which are the big drum, cymbals and violin. After the song, there is some dancing, and the entertainment generally winds up with a military drill *al' Anglaise*, after which, having received some monetary incentive, the troupe departs to repeat the same performance elsewhere. This, then, is what is known in Penang as a *boria* performance' (SE 18 Mar. 1905,5).

More than 30 bands were formed in the month of Muharram. They visited clubs and private residences of wealthy Chinese and Malays, and a single band would perform from dusk until dawn. They would conclude their performance and move to another place, making way for another band. It is believed that the gates of these clubhouses and residences were not

closed for several nights in the month of Muharram, and some bands earned as much as \$100 per night (SE 18 Mar. 1905,5).

Clubhouses and residences were built on stilts, with owners and their guests watching the *boria* performance from the patio. The performers would stand on the ground in the courtyard and look up at the owners during the performance. To placate listeners in the hope of earning higher incentives, the lyricist would improvise the lyrics in praise of the hosts, and their success or failure would be measured by the amount of money that they receive.

**Performance by visiting residences:
boria bands fighting with each other**

As *boria* became established as a lively night-time event during the month of Muharram, fighting between bands became frequent, frequently spilling outside the *boria* performance¹⁴).

The bands eventually began lingering at the place of performance to prevent other bands from arriving. Bands waiting for their turn outside the gates would numbly throw stones inside the gates, frequently causing fights between the bands (SE 4 Sep. 1922,4). The *boria* bands were once associated with two mutually-opposed secret societies, the Red Flag and White Flag, with each flying their respective flags during the performance. The flags were visible from outside the courtyard wall to indicate which group the band belonged to, and fights frequently broke out between bands belonging to opposing groups.

Boria was often reported in English dailies in Penang as unrest between

14) Two secret societies—the Red Flag and White Flag—were at loggerheads in 19th century Penang, and the conflict between the two secret societies escalated especially during the annual month of Muharram. The two Muslim secret societies were each associated with a Chinese secret society, leading to the Penang Riots of 1867. After this riot, secret societies in the Penang Muslim community were restricted, but *boria* continued being used to secure members (Mahani Musa 2003).

bands, as presented in the examples below. In March 1906, a quarrel broke out between performers of two *boria* bands opposite the Chinese Club in McAllister Street, which nearly led to a fistfight, but the police rushed to the scene and prevented it from escalating (SE 5 Mar. 1906,4). In another case, a fight broke out between *boria* bands on Hutton Lane, and some Malay members of one of the bands were arrested for attempting to attack the house of a Malay member of the opponent band (SE 2 Jun. 1906,4).

Hutton Lane was well known for fights between bands during the annual *boria* season. Notably, 17 people were arrested for fights between *boria* bands in February 1907 (PG 23 Feb. 1907,4; 25 Feb. 1907,5), and 28 people were detained for fights between *boria* bands in Buckingham Street and Hutton Lane in February 1908 (PG 14 Feb. 1908,3)¹⁵.

Moreover, there were reports of some incidents during the *boria* season: audiences being robbed while watching *boria* or while returning home from *boria*. In February 1908, a Malay woman, a performer in a *boria* band, was returning to Malay Club on Argyle Street in a rickshaw with a band member at 3am after completing *boria* in several places, when she was attacked by unknown men as she was leaving the rickshaw. She tried escaping in the same rickshaw, but the men, numbering around 15, pursued her until Transfer Street, dragged her out of the rickshaw, and stole her gold bangles (SE 27 Feb. 1908,4; 28 Feb. 1908,5; 29 Feb. 1908,5).

There were constant complaints from residents living in the neighbourhood regarding the *boria* performance being loud and noisy. In letters to newspapers dating back to 1893, they complained that they could not sleep because the *boria* was excessively loud (PG 22 Jul. 1893,2). On one occasion, the police seized the drums of *boria* bands after a European resident complained to the police regarding the noise (SE 26 Feb. 1907,5).

During Muharram months, *boria* was widely criticised, with columns

¹⁵) Notably, 37 Malay band members were arrested after a fight broke out between *boria* bands of the Kampong Kolam and Hutton Lane (SE 29 Feb. 1908, 5; 7 Mar. 1908, 4).

covering readers' letters providing a forum for debate over *boria*'s positive and negative aspects. A letter criticising and calling for *boria*'s abolition appeared in the *Pinang Gazette* in February 1908. The writer identified himself as a non-Muslim and criticised the Malaya practices of singing loudly after consuming alcohol, and wrote that it was 'like a monkey in a human shape' in the month of Muharram, whereas other parts of the world perform rituals to mark Husayn's martyrdom (PDG 14 Feb. 1908,3).

It sparked an extensive debate on *boria*, with the *Straits Echo* publishing the opinions in the form of letters from readers. The letters revealed diverse claims regarding *boria*'s origins, with many denying any link to religion. Some opined that *boria* had its origins in religious events, but that Penang's *boria* was a traditional event with no religious affiliation (SE 20 Feb. 1908,4); that *boria* was not a religious but a national practice (SE 25 Feb. 1908,5); and that *boria* was a fellowship gathering held on the Muslim New Year's Day but was not a religious practice (SE 28 Feb. 1908,5).

Although numerous writers opposed proposals to abolish *boria*, stating that it is part of culture, they also expressed disgust at the immoral behaviour of *boria* or its performers. This was symbolised by the claim that *boria*—despite being known to showcase melancholic martyrdom—was now considered clownish, and that while one welcomed performances by respectable men and women, in reality, *boria* was nothing more than drunken, wild, and crazy debauchees uttering vulgarities to the thunderous beat of drums (SE 3 Mar. 1908,5).

As illustrated in the expressions, the understanding that *boria* derives from Islamic martyrdom plays is no longer shared by many, and it appears to be an immoral and lawless practice. Some Malays were frustrated that such a practice was being conducted by Jawi Pekan, but the British considered it to be associated with the Malays because they were indistinguishable from them.

While street performances evoked mixed reactions, *boria* was occasionally performed in state ceremonies. On 22 June 1911, celebrations

were held across Malaya to mark the coronation of King George V. Prior to the coronation, a group of English-educated young Muslims in Penang formed the Young Muslim Union (YMU) on 15 October 1910, and resolved to participate in the coronation the following year. A general meeting of the YMU on 24 December 1911 discussed the possibility of hosting *boria*. *Boria* was held at the annual meeting at its headquarter in Hutton Lane. During the first performance on 5 December 1913, a tribute to the police was woven into the lyrics, commending them for arresting a burglar the previous day (SE 6 Dec. 1913,7).

Other clubs began inviting *boria* bands to their annual meetings. Efforts by the clubs to make *boria* a wholesome event resulted in the observations in 1916 that ‘in the last two years there has not been a single fight’ (SE 1 Nov. 1916,4), and that ‘in the month of Muharram this year there was no fight between the Malays and Mohammedans’ (PG 10 Nov. 1916,7).

Hamilton—writing regarding *boria* in 1920—noted that fights between *boria* bands had ceased. He wrote that ‘in the past, frequent clashes between the two factions, Red Flag and White Flag, made the more peaceful Muhammadans of Penang considerably apprehensive regarding the *boria* season. Each formed a secret society in cooperation with the Chinese. However, in recent years, this unruly element had disappeared, with only remnants remaining on red or white cloth tied to sticks or seen as challenging references in the choruses of the theatre groups involved’ (Hamilton 1920).

Claims that *boria* is a non-Muslim alien practice

The claims that *boria* is associated with, if not originated from, Islam led to discontent among Muslim leaders. Several members of the Mohammedan Advisory Board in Penang called for the abolition of *boria* in September 1920, triggering a renewed debate in the *Pinang Gazette* and

Straits Echo over whether *boria* should be practised or abolished.

A reader who identified himself as a 'young Muslim from Penang' wrote that 'Most Malays do not understand why this practice is done, but non-Muslims understand that it is a practice linked to the Islamic faith. Muslims understand this as an immoral practice that is not religiously recognised and is criticised by local religious leaders. Good people do not take part in *boria* and some even hate it' (SE 6 Sep. 1920,8).

In an article referring to Penang's *boria*, the *Utusan Melayu*, a Malay newspaper published in Singapore, wrote that 'the Malays in Penang talk only about this vice. I hope respectable people never participate in this evil practice again' (SE 6 Sep. 1920,8). Several readers countered the article through letters to the *Straits Echo*. One letter reminded the Singaporean daily that '*boria* has nothing to do with Islam, but is merely a practice of the Jawi Pekan of Penang, a mixture of South Indian Muslims and local Malays' (SE 14 Sep. 1920,8).

Meanwhile, opinions in favour of abolishing *boria* continued flourishing. 'This practice has been the cause of the degradation of Malays in the town. Malay boys run away from school during the *boria* season, and have been involved in *boria* without the knowledge of their parents. Those who take part in *boria* lose sleep over the week and some get drunk and sleep on the streets. Quarrels between *boria* members from different areas of the town are also frequent. Educated people and Mohammedan community leaders have been waiting for the abolition of *boria*'. The writer commended the Mohammedan Advisory Board members for proposing to abolish *boria* (PG 7 Sep. 1920,2).

The *boria* abolition movement's culmination was a publication marked by Yusoff Sultan Mydin or S.M. Yusoff, who worked in the Education Department, when he printed a booklet entitled *Boria dan Bencananya* (*Boria and its Evil*) and distributed it throughout Penang in 1922 (Wazir 2018, chap.3;7).

S.M. Yusoff argued that the Malays were unaware of *boria*'s origins; respectable citizens did not participate in *boria*; *boria* provided an immoral opportunity for Muslims to increase their intermingling with infidels; and *boria* was an Indian Muslim practice unrelated to Islam and, hence, should be abolished.

S.M. Yusoff's letter accompanying the booklet provides insights into his thoughts. 'Although *boria* performers enjoy themselves, they are simultaneously degrading themselves and bringing shame on the entire Muslim community by their actions'. 'If our less fortunate brothers do it in ignorance, is it fair for you and me to encourage it?' 'None but those who like to see the poverty and misery of their own community will encourage this nasty performance' (PG 31 Jul. 1925,8).

By the late 19th century, *boria* bands were invited to perform at events to mark Chinese New Year with the Chinese lion dance, which infuriated S.M. Yusoff, who claimed that it has ceased to be an authentic Malay–Jawi Pekan theatre. He argued that other Malay *mendu* theatres should be encouraged to perform plays, such as 'Syair Abdul Muluk', 'Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang Cina', and 'Indraputra' instead of *boria* (Wazir 2018,92).

Moreover, there was a *boria* performance by an amateur Chinese theatre troupe known as the Teluk Anson Borea Troupe, which visited Ipoh, Perak, and gave two performances over the weekend at the Cinema Hall in New Town. It was the first time that the troupe was performing in Ipoh. It performed a Chinese play in two parts over two evenings, with numerous Chinese and Malays in attendance (SE 28 Aug. 1918,6).

Despite abolitionist arguments, *boria* was favoured by mukims, receiving invitations to visit the residences and clubs of wealthy Chinese and Muslims in the town. Bands with good poetry became popular, especially stories regarding Harry Carey's life (SE 13 Sep. 1921,6).

Further, there were some objections to the abolitionist argument for *boria*. The following letter is one such example. 'What we have seen in the

last few years is the police entering houses in the middle of a *boria* and telling the owner to turn off the lights and disperse the audience, which included women and children. They then seize the instruments. The lights are switched off, the band is disbanded and the audience leaves, but the pride of being subjects of the British Empire does not increase. The host spends time, effort and money entertaining various people, and just as the guests are about to praise the host for his generosity, a British policeman arrives, abuses the host for breaking the law, and threatens to arrest him. Why don't the police give the slightest consideration to Malays? We only have celebrations five days a year' (PG 7 Aug. 1924,5).

Seventeen Muslim leaders signed a fatwa stating that *boria* is not an Islamic practice (PG 8 Aug. 1924,4). About 1,500 copies of the fatwa were printed and distributed throughout the state. It clearly stated that *boria* was religiously illegal (PG 12 Aug. 1924,7). Some of those who opposed *boria* at the Advisory Board were subsequently satisfied with the status quo and began supporting *boria* (PG 1924.8.11:5). S.M. Yusoff continued advocating against *boria* until his death in 1945 at the age of 51, despite criticism from *boria* supporters.

Amusement parks and competitions:

***boria* bands competing for excellence on stage**

Competitions were held from the late 1920s in an attempt to promote respectable *boria*. Interestingly in terms of the multi-ethnic origins of *boria*, the predecessor of *boria* competition was a Chinese organisation Hu Yew Seah (League of Helping Hands), founded in Penang in 1914 to promote Chinese language education¹⁶⁾.

Hu Yew Seah became increasingly active in the 1920s, with in-house

¹⁶⁾ For the background to the founding of Hu Yew Seah and its activities up to 1928, see (SE 27 Dec. 1928, 10).

debates and anniversary celebrations. The timing of the anniversary celebration was not fixed, and in 1926, it occurred over four days, starting with an in-house debate on Friday, 16 July. The last day, Monday, 19 July, was on the 10th day of the Muharram month, and Hu Yew Seah invited the *boria* band to the society's premise for a performance (SE 19 Jul. 1926,19). It was no coincidence that the anniversary celebrations coincided with the 10th day of the Muharram month on 9 July 1927 (SE 11 Jul. 1927,10)¹⁷).

Various organisations, including newly established Malay associations, began inviting the *boria* band on anniversaries. The Penang Malay Association was established in 1927—inspired by the formation of the Singapore Malay Union in 1926—in what is considered a rise of Malay nationalism in Singapore. Whereas ethnic Malays were considered distinct from Arab and Indian Muslims in Singapore Malay Union, hybrid Malays including Jawi Pekan were the core of the community in Penang, and the Penang Malay Association's definition of Malay was Muslim, customarily Malay-speaking, and with at least one parent being Malay.

The Penang Malay Association held a *boria* competition at its annual meeting, where several *boria* bands were invited. Subsequently other clubs and associations began holding *boria* competitions at their annual meetings. The Music and Recreation Party awarded a silver cup to an outstanding *boria* band that performed at their annual meeting in 1927 (SE 9 Jul. 1927,8). The Rotary Club held a *boria* competition in 1928 to recognise outstanding bands, while several other clubs also held competitions to recognise outstanding *boria* bands.

Boria bands were invited to perform at the clubhouse during the *boria* season, with the best bands being awarded at dawn. Along with recognising the best band, the competition was aimed at reducing the incidence of fights

17) Starting from 1928, the anniversary was celebrated on 25 December, but the practice of *boria* performance on the 10th day of the Muharram month remained, with *boria* held at the society's premise on 28 and 29 June in 1928 (SE 28 Jun. 1928, 3) and 15 and 16 June in 1929 (SE 14 Jun. 1929,5).

between bands. Additionally, the competition provided a sense of belonging to residents when the winning *boria* bands belonged to their districts.

The emergence of commercial amusement parks marked another major development with respect to *boria*. Following the opening of the New World amusement park in Singapore in 1923, commercial amusement parks with theatres and cinemas opened in Penang: Fun & Frolic Park in October 1931, and Wembley Park in July 1932.

A *boria* performance was held at the Fun & Frolic Park from 13 to 15 May 1932 (SE 13 May 1932,7). A correspondent covering the event wrote that *boria* had been a hindrance to civic life because it occurred throughout the night, and that it should be abolished because bangsawan (Malay opera) and movies were now available any time of the day in the amusement park (SE 23 May 1932,7).

However, amusement parks opened up new avenues of development for *boria*, making it among the most popular forms of entertainment. The timing of *boria* was no longer limited to the month of Muharram (SE 23 Mar. 1939,13), and in a shift from the past, *boria* bands went up on stage while the audience sat on the ground to watch them (SE 24 Dec. 1932,7).

Boria competitions continued being held in amusement parks. Outstanding bands were awarded at the *Boria* Carnival Night at Wembley Park in 1934. *Boria* was held on Sundays and Mondays, with cups for two outstanding bands and medals for the most outstanding *tukang karang* (SE 21 Apr. 1934,10). In 1935, thirteen bands performed at Wembley Park on Friday night and fourteen bands on Saturday night, with prizes awarded for three outstanding bands¹⁸⁾.

The move to award prizes at amusement parks and clubs led to popular multi-award winning bands. For example, the Scottish Highlanders Borea

18) The winners were the Scottish Highlanders of Hutton Lane, with their distinctive skirts and bands; the second place went to Sir Majalis Kronchong Party, who performed music and dance in Spanish costumes; the third prize went to Evergreen Kronchong Party of Sungai Pinang, who specialised in kronchong music (SE 15 Apr. 1935, 7).

Party won awards at Wembley Park as well as at Bahrol Alam, Jaamatol Fatal, Malay Sporting Club, and Babul Rahim in 1935 (SE 19 Apr. 1935,16). It is believed that rivalry between bands has increased since cups were awarded in 1935 (SE 28 Mar. 1938,13).

Coronation and radio:

***boria* performance to an imaginary absent audience**

While *boria* was appreciated across ethnic lines at amusement parks, the idea of *boria* as their own folk festival emerged among the Malays after being linked to state ceremonies within the British Empire.

When celebrations were organised throughout Malaya on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the coronation of King George V in 1935, it was suggested that the Malays should organise a *boria* procession for the celebration (SE 13 mar. 1933,7). As the month of Muharram was set to commence on 13 April that year, performing *boria* after the 10th day of the Muharram month was justified on the grounds that it would only extend the performance by a few weeks until Jubilee Week in May.

A proposal was advanced that on 4 May, the coronation day, there would be a procession of *boria* bands from thirty five mukims (wards) and clubs in Penang that would be categorised into seven groups. The procession would have Dato Keramat ground as its destination, where the *boria* competition would occur, and prizes would be awarded to three marches and *boria* bands each (SE 6 Apr. 1935,7).

The final plan for the *boria* procession was announced 10 days before the coronation day, with a large number of bands participating. According to the plan, fifty *boria* bands would gather at Volunteer Headquarters at Peel Avenue, and would start the procession through town led by Hadiyah Arabic School students and Malay School Boy Scouts at 3pm. The procession would be divided into seven groups and arrive at the Dato Keramat

ground at 6.30pm, by the time mosques, houses, and clubs would kindle their decorations. *Boria* and traditional dances and martial arts would be performed at Dato Keramat ground from 8pm to 4am; then, cups would be awarded to the three best *boria* bands (SE 25 Apr. 1935,7).

The final plan drew widespread criticism that there were only some wealthy Malay houses along the route and that it did not proceed through the Malay area¹⁹). According to those critics, there was not a single Malay house between Kelawi Road and Acheen Road (SE 25 Apr. 1935,7), and there were only three Malay houses of the 53 houses in eight miles from York Road through Acheen Street to Dato Keramat ground (SE 29 Apr. 1935,7). One critic wrote a letter to *Straits Echo*, stating that there were 480 Malay houses within three miles on Brick Kiln Road, Sungei Pinang Road, and Perak Road, all economically disadvantaged. As the residents would be proceeding to Dato Keramat ground on foot, they would appreciate if the organiser of the procession decided to change the route and follow that road. The critic ended the article by reminding that the *boria* procession ‘should be for Muslims and Malays’ (SE 29 Apr. 1935,7). *Boria*—once considered an alien event of Indian Muslims—came to be seen as belonging to Muslims and Malays²⁰).

As *boria* bands began performing, the importance of weaving tributes to the hosts into the lyrics declined, and lyrics were created to entertain a wider audience. In the *boria* competition on coronation day, the conceptual object of the tribute was King George V, 10,000 kilometres away from the competition venue.

For those who could not attend *boria*, there was a radio broadcast. As outstanding *boria* bands of the year were awarded at *boria* competitions,

19) The procession would pass along the following roads: Peel Avenue, Race Course road, Residency Road, York Road, Ayer Itam Road, Dato Keramat Road, Perak Road, Anson Road, Macalister Road, Aboo Sittee Lane, Nagore Road, Hutton Lane, Penang Road, Light Street, Beach Street, Carnarvon Street, Maxwell Road, Penang Road(*), Dato Keramat Road, and Perak Road, ending at Dato Keramat ground (Penang Road(*) is probably a misnomer for Magazine Road).

20) Despite criticism, the route of the procession was not changed (SE 2 May 1935, 10).

there was an increased desire to listen to the *tukang karang* verses of the bands by those who could not attend the competitions.

When the Penang Wireless Society's ZHJ station began radio broadcasting in Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English in August 1934, it received numerous requests from listeners in Penang and beyond to invite *boria* bands to broadcast their performances on the radio (SE 20 May 1935,14). Malay Regiment Boreas Party in Sungei Pinang was on radio on 1 June 1935 (SE 31 May 1935,7). The programme started with a kroncong singing by a trio including Hasna, followed by a *boria* performance under Janaludin as *tukang karang*, which concluded with Hasna's kroncong singing. Listeners who were captivated by her singing provided extensive feedback to the radio station, including suggestions for a weekly weekend programme on the radio to introduce *boria* bands and discover talent in the unique local performing arts (SE 3 Jun. 1935,14)²¹).

Controversy over whether Jawi Pekan is Malay

Boria had become a hybrid ethnic entertainment, and it was not uncommon for the Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians to participate in *boria* during the 1930s. A variety of music from Arab to Chinese was played as part of *boria*, and people would recite the lyrics long after the season had ended. *Boria* stories ranged from local folklore to Western thrillers, with many being Western dramas; however, gradually, the number of Malay classics increased. This has caused a reaction from the Malays that their performing arts are being encroached upon by different ethnic groups, indicating a growing awareness that *boria* is a performing art that belongs to the Malays.

In 1941, some critiques noted that *boria* performances were being

²¹) Initially, Miss Hasna was featured as the first Malay woman to sing into a radio microphone, but it was later discovered that the honour belonged to Miss Kiah of Kiah Opera, who had appeared on the radio the previous year (SE 3 Jun. 1935, 14).

held at amusement parks outside the month of Muharram, and that *borias* were being used by different ethnic groups who owned the amusement park (Majlis 15 Mar. 1941,17). Further, the critiques noted that although there were prizes for best *boria* bands at the amusement park, the prize money was significantly less than the income earned from the admission fee (Majlis 15 Mar. 1941,17). As most people paying the admission fee to watch *boria* would be Malay, there was criticism that the amusement park organisers, who are of a different ethnicity, pocketed most of the admission fees paid by the Malay audience.

The Malays’ growing recognition of *boria* as their own festival must be considered in conjunction with the changing perceptions of the Malay–Jawi Pekan relationship. The controversy regarding the relationship between Malays and the Jawi Pekan dating back to the 1920s is worth noting.

A fight broke out during a football match at the Dato Keramat ground in April 1923. Supporters of Hutton Lane Football Club and Crescents from the MacAlister Street rushed to the ground during the game, and a clash broke out between them. Hutton Lane and MacAlister street are two districts once known for their rivalry and fights between their *boria* bands during the *boria* season. An article in the *Straits Echo* linked the fight to a former incident between the *boria* bands, noting that the fight was the ‘old *boria* business’, and that the Malays were not ‘born tired’ but ‘bone-lazy’ (SE 16 Apr. 1923,3).

In response, Mohammedan Football Association President A.O. Merican highlighted the article’s factual errors, stating that the fight was short-lived and order was immediately restored. He added that fellow Malays were natives of Penang and that he was uncomfortable with Malays being blamed in reference to the practice of *boria*, which is considered an alien immigration practice (SE 19, Apr. 1923,3).

This caused a controversy in the *Straits Echo* regarding the relationship between Jawi Pekan and Malays. While some argued that Indian Muslims

should not be treated as Malays because they are an alien race, it was recognised that Jawi Pekan and Malays cannot be separated in light of local social conventions²²).

As mentioned earlier, Malay ethnic consciousness rose in the 1920s, and Malay associations were established across Malaya, beginning with the Singapore Malay Union. While the Singapore Malay Union refused membership to anyone other than pure Malays, the Penang Malay Association was composed largely of Jawi Pekan, and a Malay was defined as 'a person professing the Muslim religion and habitually speaking Malay, of whose parents one at least is a person of Malayan race' (Fujimoto 1989,138). This perception was widely accepted in Penang, including by colonial administrators, through the appointment of Jawi Pekan to the positions of Justice of the Peace and Municipal Commissioner, which were assigned to Malays (Fujimoto 1989,142).

However, whether Jawi Pekan was Malay was again a subject of debate in 1931. In a speech to the Rotary Club of Penang in January 1931, Mohamed Arif triggered controversy when he stated that Malays had their origins in India and that any Muslim born in Penang and spoke Malay should be considered a Malay, no matter who their ancestors were (SE 7 Jan. 1931,7). It was argued that it was only true if the father was a 'true Malay' (SE 12 Jan.1931,7; 15 Jan.1931,7), and that even a locally-born Malay-speaking Muslim was not considered a Malay if they have a country outside Malaya to rely on (SE 22 Jan.1931,7). Further, there were claims that some people were hiding their identity as Jawi Pekan and acting as Malays to get elected as Legislative Councillors (SE 5 Jun.1931,7). Differing from the 1923 controversy, the question of 'who is a Malay' was closely related to political participation.

22) Examples of arguments include the following: several Muslims who identify themselves as Malays in Penang are not actually Malays but Jawi Pekan or 'Bazaar Malay' of South Indian origin (SE 1 May 1923,3); Jawi Pekan means 'Town Malay' rather than 'Bazaar Malay' and are, therefore, considered Malays (SE 2 May 1923,5); Jawi Pekan is 'Town Malay', which is an expression of the awareness of rural Malays that urban Muslims are part of their community (SE 8 May 1923,5).

After the 1931 controversy, Jawi Pekan was no longer mentioned in that newspaper. Subsequently, discrepancies between Singapore and Penang over the definition of Malay surfaced with moves to form Malay organisations throughout Malaya.

Malay associations from across Malaya and Singapore met to discuss the establishment of a national Malay organisation. When the first conference was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1939 following an initiative by the Singapore Malay Union, the Penang Malay Association, though it was not invited, sent a representative to the conference, and raised an agenda on the definition of Malay. The Penang Malay Association insisted that Malays with mixed blood be included, a proposal opposed by the Singapore Malay Union, which emphasised ‘true Malays’, and the Penang Malay Association was excluded from the conference. The conference failed to reach a consensus on the formation of a national organisation; a second national conference was held in Singapore in December 1940, but did not lead to the formation of a national organisation (Roff 1967(1994), 242; Fujimoto 1989, 149–151).

Malay associations and *boria*:

***boria* as a medium for political expression for Malays**

When the Second World War ended in 1945, people eagerly waited for the resumption of *boria* competitions that were suspended during the Japanese occupation. However, resumption was postponed owing to the political situation. On its return to Malaya, the British proposed the Malayan Union, which would abolish the sultanate of Malay states and provide equal status as citizens to Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaya. Malay organisations across the country opposed the proposal, and the Malay-based political party UMNO was established in May 1946.

UMNO established branches in states, and the Penang Malay Association was requested to organise its state branch in Penang. In the

process, it was agreed that *boria* bands would not hold competitions in Penang until the Malayan Union issue was resolved (Straits Times 31 Oct. 1946,5)²³).

The Federation of Malaya was established in place of the Malayan Union in February 1948 after consultations between the British, sultans, and UMNO. The Federation of Malaya maintained the states headed by sultans and acknowledged the special status to Malays as natives of the country.

Celebrations were held on 1 February 1948, the day of the inauguration of the Federation of Malaya; a *boria* competition called Pesta Federation was organised in Penang by the UMNO state branch. *Boria* bands from 14 districts in the state gathered for the competition, each band flying the red and white UMNO flag instead of the separate red and the white flags²⁴). The *boria* performance lasted until 4am, when S.M. Aidid, president of the Penang Malay Association, presented awards to winners (Straits Times 3 Jan. 1948,8).

Although the month of Muharram had concluded more than a month-and-a-half earlier, no major criticism of the *boria* at that time of year arose. In the following year, the *Boria* Federation met on Sunday evening, 30 January 1949, to celebrate the first anniversary of the Federation of Malaya, with approximately 10,000 people, predominantly from the suburbs of Penang, in attendance. The *boria* competition commenced at 8.30pm and lasted until dawn, with 21 mukims taking part. S.M. Aidid presented the awards at 6am (Singapore Free Press 1 Feb. 1949,6).

A *boria* lyric titled 'Pahlawan Cangkul' (Hero of the Hoe) was presented by a *boria* band at the *Boria* Federation event in February 1948. The lyrics by Abdullah Darus (1929–2010)—one of the *tukang karang* leading the development of *boria* in Penang since then—marked a milestone

²³) See also (Majlis 6 Nov. 1946,9).

²⁴) That all *boria* bands flew the red and white UMNO flag symbolically revealed that *boria* bands—once opposed to each other by district under the red or white flag—were now united under UMNO.

in developing *boria* as a means of expression for rural Malays²⁵).

Abdullah was born in Ayer Itam, Penang. He married Maimunah, the daughter of his Quran teacher. Through Maimunah, who liked to watch *boria* performances, Abdullah became interested in *boria* and joined a *boria* band in Kampung Jawa Baru, his place of residence, as *tukang karang*. The first *boria* lyric written by Abdullah was ‘Pahlawan Cangkul’, performed by *Boria* Kampung Jawa Baru at the 1948 *Boria* Federation.

At the time, George Town and the surrounding area was known as Tanjung. Its inhabitants were urban dwellers, comprising traders and government employees, who considered the inhabitants of Seberang, a village area, as underdeveloped rural people. ‘Pahlawan Cangkul’ was written to raise awareness amongst Tanjung people, who had a negative impression of the rural community.

The lyric begins by declaring that a *boria*’s role is to lend advice, and *boria* works as a guidance channel; then, farmers were praised for working diligently with hoe and plough; having a good harvest each year to lend them a good outlook for the future; having sufficient food to fill their stomachs and hearts; having happy families with wife and children; learning the Quran at night; and making the pilgrimage to Mecca with a healthy body. The life of a farmer is easier than that of a scribe, as legitimate income allows one to live without debt. Addressing the city’s dwellers, the lyric concluded that ‘The peasants deserve respect and if the blessings from nature bestowed on them are ever forgotten, the inhabitants of the cities will find themselves in difficulty’²⁶).

When *Boria* Kampung Jawa Baru performed ‘Pahlawan Cangkul’ at the *Boria* Federation’s competition, the Malay audience expressed their admiration by giving coins and cigarettes to the band (Sohaimi & Rosmah 2010,46). The lyric struck a chord with rural Malays in Penang beyond

25) For background on Abdullah Darus and the lyrics to ‘Pahlawan Cangkul’, see Sohaimi & Rosmah (2010).

26) The full text of ‘Pahlawan Cangkul’ is available in Sohaimi & Rosmah (2010, 98–100).

Kampung Jawa Baru, which led to *boria* being considered a medium for Malays, including rural Malays, to express their views.

The *Boria* Federation event occurred on Federation Day, 1 February, the anniversary of the establishment of the Federation of Malaya, until it gained independence from the British on 31 August 1957. Driven by the *Boria* Federation's efforts, the practice of *boria* being held only in the month of Muharram ceased, and the systematisation of *boria* performances was enhanced by *boria* competitions from the state to the village level.

Boria developed as a cultural performance unique to Penang with the loss of its original significance solely as a Muslim martyrdom play. With the introduction of party politics and elections in Malaya ahead of independence in 1957, *boria* became closely associated with the Malay party and its politicians²⁷⁾, and a perception of *boria* as a Malay folk performance developed.

Conclusion: from boorish bands to community voice tools

Islamic martyrdom plays—brought from India to the Malay world by the mid-19th century—developed into *boria* in Penang. *Boria* began as a ritual in the month of Muharram by Muslims of Indian descent and later became known for its raucous performances by *boria* bands and fights among them. The Malays detested *boria*, considering it alien and coarse activity unrelated to Islam, and calling for its abolition. However, by the 1930s, the perception emerged that *boria* was a folk festival of the Malays. After the Second World War, *boria* gained recognition as a festival of the Malays. However, the transformation was not exclusive, and it developed into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious entertainment before becoming a festival for the Malays. In the process, *boria* experienced performances at

²⁷⁾ The close relationship between *borias* and UMNO politicians in the 1946–1960s is elaborated by Wazir (2018, chap. 7).

boria competitions, commercial amusement parks, and state ceremonies.

Boria competitions were initially intended to bring together several bands to prevent fights between bands competing for performance opportunities. However, the competitions surpassed this intention and, by recognising the best *boria* band, awareness that these bands represented their area was disseminated among those living outside the cities.

Boria competitions transformed the style of *boria* performance, from individual bands visiting clubhouses and residences to perform for their hosts, to several *boria* bands gathering at a venue and taking turns to perform to an unspecified audience. Whereas in clubhouses and private residences, the *boria* band played in the courtyard looking up at the hosts, the bands played from the stage to the audience in *boria* competitions. Symbolic of this shift in gaze, *boria* performances, especially their improvised lyrics, transformed from a tribute to their venue-specific hosts to a community-representative expression of opinion on matters of public nature.

By becoming a major attraction at commercial amusement parks in the 1930s, *boria* became an event enjoyed by mixed ethnic audiences and also occurred outside the month of Muharram, thus reducing its association with a particular ethnic group or religion.

Meanwhile, by becoming a major attraction at state ceremonies, *boria* was accorded the status of a Malay festival in the process of institutionalising the ethnic categories of Malay, Chinese, and Indian under colonial administration in Malaya. Participation in state ceremonies led to the appearance of Malay presence in the colony, which was later linked to Malay associations as a framework for political participation.

To consider *boria* as a Malay festival became part of the negotiation of the relationship between the Jawi Pekan and Malays. Although Jawi Pekan and Malays both constituted as Muslims in society, the British frequently mixed them up and held the Malays in low esteem as coarse *boria* bearers, leading to the emergence of people among the Malays who emphasised their

differences with the Jawi Pekan.

During Malaya's preparations for independence, one issue pertained to whether Malays could be defined by the purity of their bloodline or by actively recognising their mixed heritage. While the latter definition prevailed in Penang's social reality, at the national level, the former was more prominent, reflecting Singapore's social reality. The social institutions and perceptions of strict Malay, Chinese, and Indian boundaries formed through colonial rule were adopted in post-independence Malaya. However, each state has practised its own system of ethnic classification and perceptions, in alignment with local social realities, as evidenced by the Penang Malay Association, whose main members are Malays of diverse lineages, taking on the Penang branch of UMNO.

A comprehensive examination on a state-by-state basis revealed that some of the things that are understood to be associated with the Malays are of foreign origin, which developed in a multi-ethnic character over the course of Malaya's commercial development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and became associated with the Malays in the period up to around independence in 1957. Recapturing history on a state-by-state basis will result in the decolonisation of consciousness through the critical examination of the stereotypes formed during the colonial period and revealing the development of Malay identity in the context of state and local social realities.

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