

'Bangsawan Dayak' of Sarawak

by

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Introduction

Bangsawan is a Malay theatre with modern and traditional theatre elements in it. It was the first to use a proscenium stage and acting director to coach its actors, and at the same time maintained rituals of opening and closing of its performances. The Bangsawan shows were inspired by stories of aristocrats and artisans from the Middle East, India, Europe, China and Malaya, something which was close to home for the troupe as the term Bangsawan means people with noble blood (Nur Nina 1992, p.g. 19). Its performances included movements, acting, singing and dialogue on a proscenium stage equipped with curtains, backdrops, side wings and accompaniment of a live music ensemble (Rahmah 1989, p.g. 5-6).

Commercial value became the driving factor of the increase of Bangsawan troupes in Malaya in the early 20th century. The growth became immense from 1902 to 1935, regardless the size of the

troupe. Due to its popularity and its commercial value the Bangsawan troupes from both Malaya and Singapore began embarking their journey across the South China Sea, seeking for new audiences and market. Among its destinations was Sarawak (Maimunah 1993, p.g. 14, Nur Afifah 2011, p.g. 19-21).

Among the earliest Bangsawan groups to perform in Sarawak were Malay Opera of Malacca founded by Wan Yet Ak-Kaf in 1941 and British Malaya Opera founded by a pair of Javanese husband and wife, Pak Renek and Mak Otok in 1931. Both troupes performed all over Sarawak including Kuching, Sibul and More (Nur Afifah 2011, p.g. 21). In the late 1930s the Noran Opera of Malacca, lead by Abdul Rahman Mat performed in Sarawak (Obe Khaironi 2004).

The Existence of local Bangsawan troupes lead by foreign *tauke* (BTLFT)

Local troupes lead by foreign *tauke*/proprietor were first established in the 1930s. The *tauke* of the troupes were among the ex members of BTLFT who have decided to reside in Sarawak and set up local troupes with the participations from local community members (Nakes 2004; Tinyut 2004)). Bangsawan Kampung Podam was established in the late 1930s by ex members of Ribut Orient (1930s), Wan Umar and his wife Munah (Lanyo 2005, Nakes 2005; Konad 2005). The establishment of Bangsawan Kampung Pondam marked the first participation of the Dayak ethnic group in a Bangsawan performances alongside Kampong Sameba from Bau, Kuching (Maimunah Daud 2002; Obe Khaironi 2004). Up to date these bangsawan dayak troupes and its performances have yet to be documented in detail and this paper seeks to accomplish it.