

# Accessing Shared Culture for Conflict Transformation

## *The Arts of Pattani*

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### Abstract

Since 2004 antagonism between the Malay-Muslim population in the South of Thailand and ethnic Thai-Buddhist groups has escalated. The effect has been increasing acts of violence, rebellions and state of emergency. The antagonism between the two ethnic groups has been most pronounced in the Pattani region where Islam is identified as a non-Thai culture. Throughout centuries this region has been populated with peoples holding diverse religions, customs and cultural traditions who until modern times have coexisted relatively peacefully, inspired and enriched each other. In this area, arts and culture among Malays and Thais have shared roots with artistic forms and expressions that are very much alike. The author will focus upon the cultural similarities of the two ethnic groups on the border of Malaysia and Thailand. Will mobilizing the common local culture act as a vehicle for increased understanding and reconciliation between the two ethnic groups?

**Keywords:** *Southeast Asian Theatre, Culture and Ethnicity, Performative Art, Theatre and Religion*

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## Introduction

The Pattani region is a term used to describe the southern provinces of Thailand: Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla. The Pattani region also includes the North Malaysian states of Kedah, Kelantan as well as parts of Terengganu.

Throughout time, different cultures and religions have made their impact on the region, and this is reflected in the arts and performative expressions of today. A characteristic feature of the region is the rich cultural diversity on both sides of the border. Despite the local, regional and linguistic differences, we find similar artistic and cultural forms in Northern Malaysia and Southern Thailand. Common among these performative expressions on both sides of the border is that they draw from a common dramatic repertoire that seem to serve similar purposes and religious and worldly views. The performative cultural expressions are also incredibly similar with respect to the structure of the performances and acting style.<sup>1</sup>

Most people in the region claim to be Muslims. On the Thai side of the border, the Muslim population consists of both ethnic Malay and ethnic Thai groups. The media's portrayal leaves the impression that most of the Muslim population in Thailand reside in Pattani region. However the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that only 18% of Thai Muslims live in the border provinces. The rest are scattered throughout Thailand with the largest concentration in Bangkok and the southern peninsula. Here the Thai Muslim population consists of various ethnic groups and are well assimilated in the Thai Buddhist society.

The antagonism that has arisen between the Malay Muslim South and Thai Buddhist groups in the Pattani region is as well known abroad as it is domestically. Since 2004, the surge of violence in the region had extensive media coverage both nationally and internationally. The publicity has induced fear for the conditions in the south in addition to signaling an increasing state of resentment between the two ethnic groups. In this paper, I focus on the cultural similarities of two ethnic groups on the border of Malaysia and Thailand. My analytic point of view understands culture as a way of thinking – a derivative of individual thoughts and experiences. This understanding of culture is not primarily connected to race, ethnicity or religious affiliation, but comes into being inside the individual in relation to other individuals and group dynamics.<sup>2</sup> The discussion will be based on the tradition of shadow play in the region: the Malaysian shadow play *Wayang Siam* and the Thai shadow play *Nang Thalung*. My paper shows the close relationship between these forms and leads to the question: Will mobilizing the common local culture act as a vehicle for increased understanding and reconciliation between the two ethnic groups?

### The Arts of the Pattani Region<sup>3</sup>

The Malaysian states of Kelantan and Kedah are especially well known due to their splendid handicraft and extensive musical traditions. The court orchestra tradition called *Nobat* is still played in this area. The *Gendang Nobat* (court orchestra) is reminiscent of pre-colonial societies organized into a feudal system in which the king's sovereignty is legitimized through the Hindu concept of *derhaka*

and the divine king.<sup>4</sup> The king's divine and magical power highly affected his regalia which also included his royal orchestra (Khartomi 1997). The king's orchestra was imbued with the same magical and supernatural power as the king and was believed to cure people. In these societies, all subjects were identified by their loyalty to the king. To this day the Nobat is considered holy. Also in Malaysia today are four distinctive types of shadow plays: *Wayang Purwa*, *Wayang Melaju*, *Wayang Siam* and *Wayang Gedek* (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1992; Matusky, 1980; Sweeny, 1972). Until recently, the ancient and traditional *Mak Yong* dance theater together with the therapeutic dance theater *Main Puetri* served important social and ritual functions in this region (Laderman, 1992; Kvam, 2005; Ghulam- Sarwar, 1976).

In the southern Thai provinces, two forms of entertainment are foremost in popularity: the shadow play *Nang Thalung* and the *Manora* dance drama or *Manora Chatri*. The *Manora (nora)* tradition is based on a story found in the *Jataka Tales* collection. In this story *Manora* is a heavenly bird maiden who comes to marry a human prince. Throughout generations, the *Manora* tradition has been performed in a rich variety of ways. Due to the increased interest from academia during the 1970s, *Manora* became part of the southern Thai universities' curriculum by which the highly stylized dance vocabulary which forms the basic steps of the performances has been preserved. Besides *Nang Thalung*, the most well known shadow play in the region is *Nang Yai*. *Nang Yai* uses large shadow puppets which are carried by dancers in front of a screen. Undoubtedly, the *Nang Thalung* tradition is the most popular and approved theater tradition today.

### **The Shadow Play in Pattani Region: Wayang Siam and Nang Thalung**

The origin and precise distribution and development of the shadow play remain unclear. In ancient times written records were exclusively connected with the courts. Thus, the first written sources describe shadow theater as part of a court entertainment in Java around the year 1000 (Brandon, 1970). Other theories claim that the shadow play originated as a folk theater tradition (Hazeu, 1897; Rasser, 1959). They underline that the shadow play must have existed many hundreds of years before it was presented as a sophisticated court art form. Shadow plays grew out of a native ancestor's worship in which the souls of the ancestors were brought to life as shadows in order to protect the people and give them advice and magical assistance. Conflicting theories postulate Chinese, Javanese, Central Asian and Indian origins for the shadow play.

Even though the shadow play is a complex theater form, almost all performances are performed by a single puppeteer and his musicians. The puppeteer (*dalang* in Malaysia, *nai nang* in Thailand) manipulates puppets behind a white cloth screen. A light source is positioned above the puppeteer's head. The puppets are thin, plain and colored, and cast shadows varying in both obscurity and size, depending on the distance between the light source and the screen. The audience sits on the ground in front of the screen, often chatting and calling to each other while watching the performance. The puppeteer is a craftsman and an artist with exceptional skill; he is often a magician well known for his supernatural power which also determines his popularity.



Figure 1. Dalang Nik Mat – Malaysia.

The shadow play has served several important functions in the societies. Throughout time, kings and sultans have used the shadow play as a vehicle for propaganda and self-glorification (Hall, 1970; Sears, 1996; Brandon, 1970). At the same time, the theater has been intimately connected to rural and agricultural society. Besides entertaining, it has served important ritual functions as well as being an important vehicle for exercising social criticism, to make fun of rulers and social conditions in the villages. Shadow play has also held an important place in public education and social learning. The interaction on screen between laymen and scholars, clowns and kings, servants, demons and gods has produced models for important social values and norms.

In more recent times, the shadow theater in Thailand and Malaysia has also been used as a platform for authorities to communicate their interests to the people. This was especially visible during the 1970s when shadow theater was used on both sides of the border to suppress Marxism. *Dalangs* were sponsored by the national government, supplied with complete scripts and sent out to spread anti-Marxist propaganda (Wright, 1983; Dowsey-Magog, 2002, 2005). Somewhat later, the shadow theater was met with renewed interest from national governments, scholars and cultural workers. The regions and its cultural traditions came again into focus in the building of national culture and national identity. This resulted in a certain standardization of the theater that can still be traced to this day. The external interest in regional theater led to the form becoming well-known also outside the rural areas.

Together with general modernization processes such as industrialization, electrification, agricultural reforms and increased pressure from the media, involve-

ment from both global and national authorities have contributed to a series of innovations in the theater forms. During the last 20 years, the shadow theater in Malaysia and Thailand developed in different directions. *Nang Thalung* integrated modern technology and instruments, pop music and modernized repertoires. Today the continuum between the ancient and modern *Nang* can easily be observed through its extremes, *Nang Booraan* (Ancient *nang*) and *Nang Samai* (modern *nang*) respectively. Interest for *Nang Thalung* has been increasing, involving larger and larger audiences (Dowsey-Magog, 2002, 2005).

During the last 20 years, the puppeteers in Malaysia have been forced to adapt their performances due to increased pressure and criticism from Muslim fundamentalists. In some states performing shadow theater has become illegal except for performances held for tourists or research purposes. It is especially the elements regarded as non-Islamist that are purged from the performances (Kvam, 2011). Through this banning process it may seem like the theater is being forced to withdraw from both tradition and modern society.

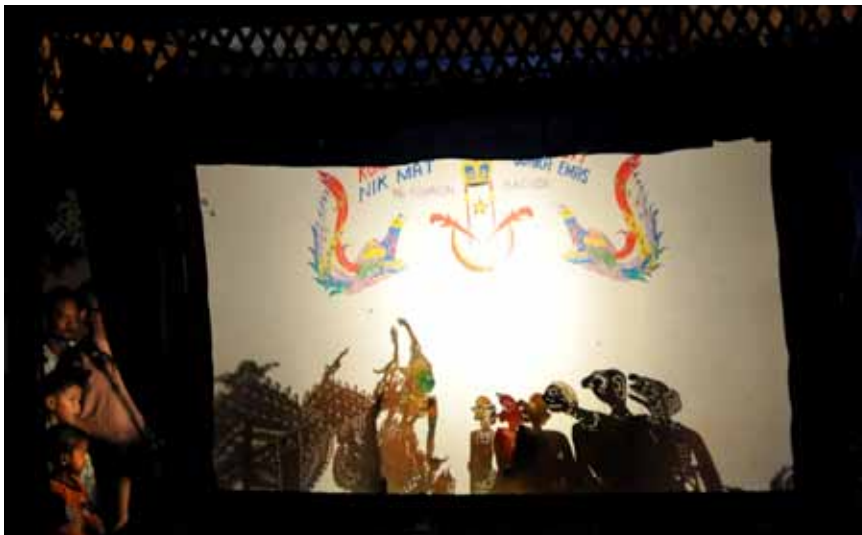


Figure 2. Frontal - audience view.

### Dramatic Content and Dramatic Personae

The dramatic characters involved in the shadow theater comprise of kings and queens, bandits, supernatural beings, farmers and clowns, Hindu deities and Brahman hermits. The puppets' shapes in *Wayang Siam* and *Nang Thalung* are also quite similar as seen in figure 3 and 4. The mythical foundation for the two forms of the shadow theater has traditionally been the *Ramayana* in Malaysia, or *Ramakien* in Thailand. It can be seen in the earliest records that the *dalangs* have been creative innovators and developed new dramatic material and stories. The *Ramayana* stories in Malaysia have been mixed with local legends and *Ramayana* branch stories. The will to develop and renew the repertoire is more observable within *Nang Thalung*. Contemporary *Nang Thalung* stories revolve around court intrigue, heroic escapes, romance and comedy within a web of good versus evil. The theme in the dramatic material is mixed. It can be centered around family feuds, wise men giving lessons in magic, romantic stories or astounding fairy tales that wandering heroes often experience on their quests.





Figure 3. King Rama and the old hermit.

### The Clowns

The purpose of the clown in shadow theater has been a trigger for both fascination and interest from researchers since its first appearance. Lind discusses the *dalangs'* socially critical function in the Indonesian shadow theater. The criticism appears, according to Lind, because of the different linguistic codes in shadow theater. The clowns speak an everyday language in stark contrast to the noble and archaic language that dominates the performance overall. Through this the clown mediates between the superior noblemen and the common people (Lind, 1983).<sup>5</sup>

Also Johnson underlines how the clowns in *Nang Thalung* work as a “social mouth-piece.” “They laugh at the follies of the noble (including religious elite) and poke fun at the audiences and at the issues of the day – poverty, religion, the economy and so forth” (Johnson, 2006). The clowns are crude and plump, and their humor often revolves around sexuality and bodily functions. In every way the clowns belong to an entirely different social standing compared to the rest of the cast. At the same time, their crude behavior and downtrodden appearance is a charade. *Pak Dogol*, one of the most important clowns in *Wayang Siam*, is actually the deity *Sang Tang Tunggal* descended from heaven. So he is in fact a god and a clown, as well as a farmer who in addition is quite familiar with magic (Wright, 1983). In *Nang Thalung* the clowns are believed by many Southern Thai to be invested with sacred power unmatched by even the most powerful of the Hindu-Buddhist deities

(Johnson, 2006). Unlike the Malay shadow play tradition where the clown's association with the divine is clearly spelled out in the narrative tradition, the origin of the *Nang Thalung* clown's magical potency remains a mystery. The clowns are associated with luck and fortune and can give advice in lotteries and love. The importance of the clowns is further emphasized by the fact that they are kept in separate special cases and are even worshiped. In Thailand, we also find images of clowns on Buddhist alter to be worshiped and covered with gold leaves.

### **Nang Thalung and its Connection to Spirituality and Religion**

The Thai shadow theater, *Nang Thalung*, can be found all across the southern part of Thailand, most widespread in Nakon Sri Thammart, Phattalung, Trang, Surat Thani, Chumpon and Songkla. In these areas, the theater form is still significantly popular and manages to compete with other entertainment media such as television and cinema. *Nang Thalung* still maintains its intimate relationship with the Buddhist part of the population in the southern parts of Thailand constituting "a major cultural symbol of southern Thai identity." (Dowsey-Magog, 2002:185).

*Nang Thalung* has primarily been a folk theater form, played for and by rural villagers. Within the rural population, the form has had a ritual and entertainment function. In recent times, the *Nang Thalung* has increasingly been integrated into more urban areas as a form of entertainment for the working class. *Nang Thalung* is an important part of all village celebrations. It is played in local homes, on small outdoor stages, on temple grounds and in connection with markets and exhibitions. *Nang Thalung* is also presented on television outside the southern areas (Johnson, 2006; Dowsey-Magog, 2002, 2005).

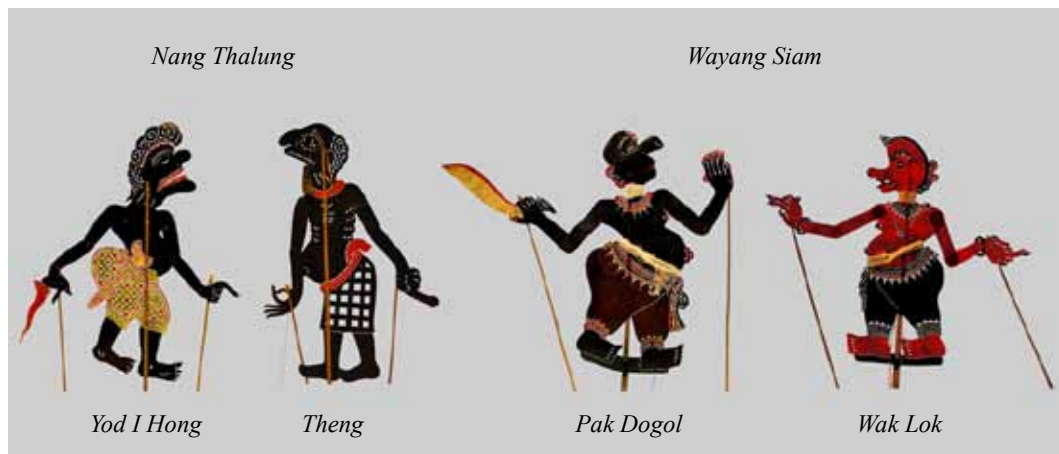


Figure 4. The clowns.

Already the opening of the *Nang Thalung* performance ties the theater to a spiritual and religious sphere. The opening contains a series of religious ritual episodes combining Buddhist prayers and local varieties of "Folk Brahmanism" (Dowsey-Magog, 2002). The first and last puppet to appear on screen is *Rusi*, an old man often dressed in tiger skins. Dowsey-Magog describes the *Rusi* in this way: He "... combines the talents of forest dwelling animist shaman, learned Brahmanism scholar and teacher and more recently, Buddhist forest monk" (Dowsey-Magog,

2002:188). He chants Buddhist prayers and incantations, presenting his secret magic wisdom to invoke the good spirits in the surrounding environment. He is a protector of the audience, puppeteers, orchestra, surroundings and the theater. Other puppets with magical power also appear during the beginning of the performance invoking powers in the surroundings. In this way the theater is tied to a magical and unseen world already from the beginning.

Contact with the religious and unseen is maintained throughout the performance. Dowsey-Magog describes how, “The efficacy of moral Buddhist behavior is frequently promoted, but allusions to the spirit world and unorthodox supernatural powers are included as well.” (Dowsey-Magog, 2002:189). He continues to underline how the theme in the stories gives associations to *Karma* and how the underlying reward and punishment appear as allegory to Buddhist morality and philosophy.

### Wayang Siam and its Connection to Spirituality and Religion

In contrast to its Thai sister form, the interest in and popularity of the Malaysian shadow theater *Wayang Siam* has been declining the last 20 years. On the Malaysian side of the border areas, there is considerable external influence from fundamentalist Muslim movements. These political movements have, to a large degree, scared people away from dance and theater. In Kelantan, PAS (Parti Islam Se Malaysia), the most fundamental Muslim party, won state elections over several years. The result has been an illegalization of the traditional dance and theater forms over extended periods of time. In spite of all the prohibitions and suspicion of the traditional culture, Kelantan is still considered the cradle of Malay culture and deemed the theater state *par excellence*. During the 30 years that I have been following the development of the form, there has been an apparent decline. During the 1970s there were more than 200 active *dalangs* in Kelantan only, while in 2012 I could only find five. There is also a considerable effort being made by the national government to preserve the local culture in Kelantan which the regional leaders oppose and forbid. The national government is attempting to intervene in the destruction of local culture by building cultural centers and teaching adults local culture and tradition.

Also in *Wayang Siam*, the connection to the spiritual world is established already in the opening scenes. The first puppet that appears on the screen is *pokok beringin*, (the tree of life or breath of life) which symbolizes the contact with the spiritual world. The succeeding puppet is *Maharisi*, the wise old hermit with direct ties to *Nang Thalung's Rusi*. He is clothed similarly to *Rusi*, using a walking stick and chanting holy incantations and prayers. In contrast, however, on the Malaysian side of the border Islamic prayers are recited in addition to other and local spirits and gods being involved. *Maharisi* also uses Thai phrases and a magical language. The next puppets to appear on screen are the two Hindu *Dewas* (gods) who perform a ritual battle. Parts of the Islamic creed are mixed with incantations of Hindu and Buddhist deities. Behind it all lies an animistic understanding of how the world is populated with spirits, powers and magical creatures (Wright, 1983). In that way, the theater reflects a unique and syncretic world view before the main story commences.



## Discussion

On both sides of the border, the shadow theater presents a unique and syncretic world view composed of animistic, Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic elements. In Malaysia, this view is interpreted by scholars and actors themselves as an Islamic expression. In Thailand, however, it is interpreted as an expression of Buddhist culture and religious views.

To determine this it can be beneficial to distinguish between religion and *dogma*. As early as 1926, the philosopher Alfred Whitehead described dogma as an attempt to explain in precise terms, “the truth” that lies behind the religious experience of mankind (Whitehead, 1996). Dogma is what the institutions and organizations preach and convey. Individuals weave dogma into their religious life where they are mixed with individual attempts to find meaning and explanations. In this way, many different variations of the same belief system arise. Due to this view it is the active and acting individual that creates the religion. There will therefore be an element of syncretism and religious diversity in most folk religions. That means we cannot talk about either Islam or Buddhism as one religion, but we can talk about different “Islams” and “Buddhisms.” Both Islam and Buddhism allow a variety of approaches and interpretations. Actually we can speak about different schools, branches or sects in both Islam and Buddhism, e.g. Shari, Sufism and Theravada.

The culture of the Pattani region reflects the inhabitants’ common history. Throughout time, Pattani has been part of several great and powerful kingdoms that have been important centers in Asia. Thanks to increased trade with India, the region came in contact with Hindu and Buddhist culture and religion. As early as year 300 AD, Langkasuka kingdom was an important Hindu-Buddhist kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Much points to the idea that Hinduism and Buddhism have lived side by side and probably interwoven. Between the years 700 and 1300 AD, Pattani was part of the great kingdom Sriviaya which became a center for Mahayana-Buddhism. Following this era, Pattani became part of the Islamic kingdom of Melaka, a Malay Sultanate. During this period the region became increasingly influenced by Islamic philosophy and values (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

Before the emergence of prominent empires and kingdoms, the religion in the area was based on animism and ancestor cults. The period where Indian influence becomes dominant is marked by the emergence of great empires and kingdoms with strong feudal structure. In the religious area, Hindu and Buddhist gods became part of an already existing pantheon of supernatural creatures and forces. Epic stories from India (*Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*) became an integrated part of the culture. With the Melaka kingdom, Islam made such an impact that the concept of Malay became intimately associated with Islam. Melaka and the later Islamic sultanates were well-known for their ability to attract famous Muslim priests and scholars to their court. But the religion in the region still maintained its syncretism and was not characterized by any orthodox or dogmatic interpretation of Islam. This has directly influenced the religious practice which can be seen even today.

The old feudal societies did not emphasize religion or ethnicity. The royalty exerted full control of the kingdom. The subjects were identified through their loyalty to the divine king, where *derhaka* was considered the greatest sin.

Questions tied to religion and ethnicity took a new turn after the second world with the establishment of the nation states. Ethnic groups and religions were forced to fight over more dominant positions. Also the cultural life was influenced by the nation state's need to develop a national culture and identity. According to a theoretician on nationalism, Ernest Gellner, the nation state demands cultural homogeneity (Gellner, 1998). This is a direct step towards a highly canonized culture of high status. These tendencies are highly observable in Thailand as well as in Malaysia when ethnic groups and religions are put against each other and treated as either minorities or groups demanding special rights. An increase in globalization further complicates the conflicts when external influences take root in the regions. This becomes clear through the growth of the Islamic fundamentalist movement present in Thailand as well as Malaysia.

### Conclusion and the Final Question

The need for recognizing “pure” identities or classifying people based on their ethnicity or religious belonging is a relatively modern phenomenon that many would deem as simplified and outdated. In the area of culture, globalization processes have resulted in human commonalities manifesting themselves through cultural activities. These are not bound to ethnicity, geographic boundaries or national identities. In this way it has become easier to identify oneself with other groups across national boundaries.

Like all other performative expressions, the theater builds upon the individual's ability to envision or imagine a phenomenon. Active, creative individuals and artists manifest this unseen reality through the theater. As explained above, the Shadow Theater's imaginative reality consists of a mixture of animistic, Hindu and Buddhist as well as Islamic elements. This is not a theater that reflects reality, as it is, but rather a theater manifesting an alternate reality. This liminality where the artist moves betwixt and between reflects a common imagination on both sides of the border.<sup>7</sup> Thus it makes sense to think that this shared cultural imagination and practices could be of vital importance if put into use and made known in the conflicting areas. That might just be a contribution to a beginning to an end of the long lasting conflict in South Thailand?



Figure 5. Pokok Beringin – It is used to begin and end the shadow theater performance.

## Endnotes

- 1 This paper is based on interviews, notes, video recordings and my own experiences during several periods of field work in Thailand and Malaysia from 1984 until 2012. Over the course of my fieldwork I became more and more aware of the similarities between cultural expressions in the region. Comparing early research done in Thailand and Malaysia these similarities also came apparent. See e.g. Johnson 2006, Dowsey-Magog 2002 and 2005, Ghulam-Sarwar 1976 and 1992 among others. I have not interviewed *dalang* in the region with respect of the conflict in South Thailand. The conflict itself is well documented both by press as well as internet e.g. You Tube.
- 2 See also Kevin Avruch: *Culture and Conflict Resolution*. Us Institute of Peace Press, 2004.
- 3 The literature dealing with the folk theater in Malaysia and Thailand is limited. Academic interest in studying theater in the region reached a peak in the 1970s. In addition to being limited regarding amount, most of the literature was produced between 1980 and 2000.
- 4 *Derhaka* refers to how betrayal and treason against the king was perceived as the greatest sin.
- 5 See also Pausacker 2004.
- 6 Researchers claim that the Hindu/Buddhist relationship has not been demarcated. (Andaya and Andaya 2001, Mohd. Taid Osman 1967).
- 7 Victor Turner describes liminality as the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage. "During the liminal period, the characteristics of the liminars (the ritual subjects in the phase) are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminars are often betwixt and between." Turner and Turner 1978.

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