

***Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut: Sustaining the Communal Activity With
Academic Collaboration***

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Abstract

The Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut is a historical religious traditional performing art combining the elements of stylized movements, vocals, and music in a single presentation and is claimed to be a Malay heritage that has been passed down for at least five generations of more than 150 years. The traditional art today is upheld by less than ten activists, with only one main activist left. Therefore, from being a communal gathered activity in the past, Rebana Kercing today is at the brink of extinction. This paper presents a new approach to teaching, converting the traditional learning method to a more structured pedagogical approach. By investigating the significance of Rebana Kercing components, interviewing the activists, as well as participatory observing the traditional training, the pedagogy entitled 'Training of Trainers' was planned. It was first conducted with five schools located in Kelantan state, Malaysia. Through the engagement of this pedagogy, the historical and religious components embedded in the performance are highlighted. Additionally, the training creates awareness in the community. The concept of 'togetherness' is addressed via the synchronization of dancing, singing and music performing. While written records of the earlier version of Rebana Kercing are scarce, as it has been passed down orally and informally, this paper has presented the safeguarding method to disseminate this intangible knowledge academically. That would assert further understanding of its origin and history, and it can ensure the continuation of this Rebana Kercing performance.

Keywords: Rebana Kercing, Performing Arts, Music, Dance

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Introduction

Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut is a traditional performing art that combines the elements of singing, dancing and music. Known to have existed for the past 150 years, the Rebana Kercing is regarded as a cultural heritage unique to the village of Kampung Laut, Kelantan, Malaysia. The introduction of Rebana Kercing as a unique traditional heritage is said to have resulted from the preaching activities performed by Muslim traders in the old days (Che Mohd Amran, Hussin & Mat Isa, 2021). The Rebana Kercing performing art, through its lyrics, aims primarily at showing compliments to the greatness of the God, Allah, and praises the prophet and his companions, portrayed in a state full of politeness and a variety of creative movements that have been beautifully arranged (Zakaria, 2017). This is done to attract the local Muslim community to learn more about Islam and Islamic teachings.

The existence of Rebana Kercing, is said to be in line with the existence of the Kampung Laut mosque, which was built in the 18th century. Since then, the people in Kampung Laut during that time had succeeded in adopting Rebana Kercing as a special performing art based on the teachings and practices of Islam, which is referred to as Rebana Kercing. Rebana Kercing is the namesake of its only instrument, the rebana tambourine used during the performance. As for kercing, the name is derived from the "kercing" sound made by the copper cymbals when the tambourine is hammered or sounded to accompany the song.

A Rebana Kercing performance combines dancers between the ages of 10 to 12 years old who sing the Rebana Kercing songs, accompanied by the rebana tambourine players consisting of 12 adults who will also sing along. The performing art was frequently showcased during special events like weddings and social events at palaces, as well as cultural occasions upon invitations. It has been performed to a wide panoply of audiences to let them witness and be mesmerized by the beauty of its cultural heritage (Azhar & Rosdi, 2022). To this day, its beauty is still shared with the community through performances in events such as wedding ceremonies and cultural festivals, though its popularity is declining due to modernization and other forms of easily accessible modern entertainment. With less than 10 active activists, Rebana Kercing today is on the brink of extinction.

The declining status of Rebana Kercing is obvious if seen at the number of songs left today. There are only 26 songs left, out of more than 50 songs in the past that have been undocumented and lost. Due to the local community's oral tradition and lack of written documentation, much of the history of Rebana Kercing was gone with the passing of its early activists. The reduction in popularity of Rebana Kercing in its birthplace is also caused by the lack of interest of the younger generation to be involved in training Rebana Kercing, as most children are occupied with schools' co-curricular activities, as compared to the past, where they had ample time after the school hours. The incomprehensible pronunciation of the Arabic lyrics of a Rebana Kercing performance has also made it less attractive to the audiences. Therefore, from being a communal gathered activity in the past, Rebana Kercing today is on the brink of extinction and safeguarding efforts are needed through adaptation to make it relevant.

As a dying art, the declining popularity of Rebana Kercing can be attributed to several factors that can be divided into internal and external. As for the internal factors, one of the major issues faced by Rebana Kercing is that it is exclusive only to Kampung Laut as compared to other widespread performing arts in Kelantan (Mat Amin, 1977). Thus, when other traditional performing arts are threatened with extinction, the impact is greater on Rebana Kercing. The

decline of Rebana Kercing can also be related to many younger generations of Kampung Laut emigrating to bigger cities in Malaysia for work and would only be back to Kampung Laut during festive seasons and other occasions occasionally. This did not happen in the past when the locals grew older in the village and worked in the traditional job sectors such as fisheries and plantation, as job opportunities in bigger cities were not that immense. This has caused only the elders to be responsible for upholding Rebana Kercing. Its incomprehensible lyrics, affected by the corruption of pronunciation of the original Arabic lyrics from time to time, have made it less attractive, as compared to other performing arts such as Mak Yong and Dikir Barat.

The external factors that contributed to the decline of Rebana Kercing are mainly the accessibility to other forms of modern entertainment through televisions and the Internet, which did not happen in the past. Before the 90s, the Internet was not available, and not all families had a television set at home. This resulted in more people spending more time training and watching Rebana Kercing performances. Co-curricular activities after school, such as sports and clubs, have made it less possible for school children to spend time training Rebana Kercing due to commitments. This has caused the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut Association to resort to giving incentives to attract students to train, though it is less sustainable. No effective intervention taken to revive the performing art by the local governing authority has also contributed to the issues facing this performing art.

This study presents an insight into how Rebana Kercing can be sustained as a traditional heritage through academic collaboration. This study presents a new approach to teaching, converting the traditional learning method of Rebana Kercing to a more structured pedagogical approach. Rebana Kercing's lesson is structured part by part, starting from choosing the song, memorizing the lyrics, understanding the meaning, singing, learning to play the music, and followed by dancing. In the end, all these components are combined. This study also evaluates how a sense of community involvement can be created between an academic institution and the community in preserving Rebana Kercing.

Methodology

As an effort in the Preservation of the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut project, led by Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, this research employed mixed methods. Review of past literature was conducted on available literature on the history of Rebana Kercing, Malay-Kelantanese culture, Islamic art and culture, as well as the past studies about Rebana Kering, documentary and archival analysis were investigated. Interviews with seven activists of Rebana Kercing were employed to get all information about Rebana Kercing from dance, songs and lyrics, instruments, costumes, and the current status of the art. Together with this, participant observation fieldwork was exercised to observe the engagement and perception of the Kampung Laut community regarding Rebana Kercing performance.

The participation observation fieldwork was purposively conducted to gain firsthand experience about how to play music, sing and dance directly from the activists at Kampung Laut, as it allowed the researchers to immerse in the performing art community (Howell, 1972). During this session, four basic songs were explored, namely *Bi-Lla*, *Nas-A-Lullah-Hum-Sola*, *Wa-Sol-Lal-Lah*, and *Yada A Allah Huda*. Experience from this training showed the constraint point of sustaining this art. First, as this performance was traditionally passed down through memorizing, there were not many archival records that presented the full stage of Rebana Kercing performance and lacked documentation about the music score, the dance

movement, or written lyrics that can be referred to for further study. Besides, the Rebana Kercing instrument, which was the rebana tambourines, was limited. The most worrying constraint was the ageing activists. With this all situation encountered in this participatory-observation fieldwork, a three-day training plan entitled "Training of Trainers" and "Training of Trainees" for bridging the activists who were traditionally practised in the community with academic collaborations.

Another method employed was participatory action research. As this study was about enhancing a dying performing art, a participatory action research guides researchers in reflecting, questioning, and revising the best action to be taken through the data collected (Baum et al., 2006) to preserve Rebana Kercing. The researchers utilized this method to create a Rebana Kercing training module by incorporating the theoretical and practical knowledge gained directly from Rebana Kercing fieldwork, the Islamic ethics in performance, together with other elements such as the concept of choreography, theory of performing arts, and theatre production. With systematic teaching and learning through academic engagement, this method can be a means to safeguard and sustain Rebana Kercing performance with the new learner. The content of this outcome will be elaborated on in the following session.

Findings

Sustaining Rebana Kercing (Enforcing Communal Activity)

In regards to the community involvement in the preservation of the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut, this study used the framework of the ladder of participation founded by Arnstein (1969), which introduced eight levels of participation from passive (non-participatory) to active (degree of citizen). The participation of the local community would change from passive to active when they had different levels of participation until they reached the highest level of controlling the community (citizen control) to achieve an objective. This discussion is explained as follows:

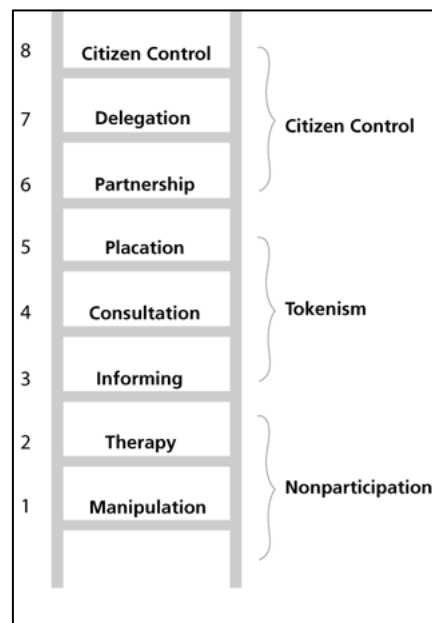


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder (1969)

From the field study, it can be analyzed that the villagers of Kampung Laut had an attempt to protect the Rebana Kercing from extinction. This can be seen through the establishment of the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut Association, which proved the handling of the community or "citizen control" of Kampung Laut at a good level in the past. The association also has a training hall and organizational structure, showing that they had a clear distribution of work and good cooperation. In addition, they also collaborated with external parties such as schools, National Department for Culture and Arts and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. The observations found that the local community, especially the activists and the association played a proactive role in this preservation project by becoming consultants and informers as well as consultants. These brought the success of the safeguarding of Rebana Kercing toward the new generation. Not only that but there were also indirect participants involved who can be classified in the non-participatory category. At this level, they are able to cooperate with the role of audiences who support the performance. However, the internal and external factors that led to this historical-religious performance were slightly forgotten or inactive. From the researcher's perspective, sustaining this art by using the traditional preservation method may freeze the art from contemporary contexts. Therefore, this research proposed a new approach to safeguard the arts by presenting a new platform that shifted from traditional communal practice to an academic community where all academicians play the support role in sustaining the arts under the training programs entitled "Training of Trainers" and "Training of Trainees" (school training).

Training of Trainers was a 3-day program aimed at preserving this dying art by safeguarding it through collaboration from the activists. This program invited the anchor of Rebana Kercing and another activist to share Rebana Kercing knowledge with performing arts students at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, who would be the new trainer of Rebana Kercing. Previously though, Rebana Kercing used to be taught to the school students, with only dance movement and singing being highlighted. School students would learn by memorizing and imitating the posture. However, for this program, the university students were encouraged to learn all components of this performance, including theoretical and practical parts. It was decided that two songs named *Ya-Rab-Bi Ya-Sir*, and *Is-sta-adi* would be taught. *Ya-Rab-Bi Ya-Sir* is a traditional song that signified the praise of God in the Islamic faith. This song is a basic song that students can practice with simple movements and floor patterns, while *Is-Sta-Adi* has basic movements mixed with the new creation. Both songs are accompanied by three types of music patterns, namely *rebana kercing ibu*, which is the main rhythm for all Rebana Kercing performances, *rebana kercing anak 1* and *rebana kercing anak 2*, which are the interlocking and syncopation rhythm. During the training, the proper music scores were produced. All the movements were documented. At the end of this training, students were able to memorize and perform the basics of these two songs. They are appointed to be the trainer for the Training of Trainees program.

While Training of Trainers focused on bridging the collaboration between activists and new trainers, Training of Trainees provided a chance for the new trainers to share their knowledge with the trainees who are school students. By doing this, one discussion meeting was conducted with the State Education Department. The purpose of this discussion is to obtain cooperation and to have permission for Universiti Malaysia Kelantan to organize a workshop with primary school students and schoolteachers to explore the Rebana Kercing art as one of the Kelantan heritages. To ensure that this workshop can expose Rebana Kercing throughout the state of Kelantan, five schools from different districts, including Kampung Laut, were selected.

The Training of Trainees was held with the aim of instilling a set of knowledge and abilities in the local traditional dance art, i.e., Rebana Kercing, theoretically and practically to schoolteachers and school students. This workshop was mainly led by a group of performing arts students along with several facilitators consisting of lecturers and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan Cultural Center officers. This workshop consisted of four main sessions, knowledge-sharing or history briefing, lyric memorizing, basic dance movements, and practising music. The practice song for school training was *Ya-Rab-Bi Ya-Sir*.

<p>YA _A _AROB-BBI-YYA---A _SIR YA _A _AROB-BBI-YYA---A _SIR YA _A _AROB-BBI-YYA---A _SIR YA _A _AROB-BBI-YYA---A _SIR (* 1 time)</p> <p>LAN-NNA _AL-DOA LAN-NNA _AL-DOA YA _RA _SSA-BB0 _O-NNA (* 1 time)</p> <p>HAI KHOM MARILLA KHOM MAA _EY _EY HAI KHOM MARILLA KHOM MAA _EY _EY (* 1 time)</p> <p>LAM-MA _BADA _O LAM-MA _BADA _O YA _RA _SSA-BBO _O-NNA (* 1 time)</p>

Figure 2: *Ya-Rab-Bi Ya-Sir* Lyric

Upon the completion of the training, it was observed that with systematic teaching and learning, trainees were able to follow the basic movement accompanied by the live music. However, since this program aims to enhance the new engagement with the new approach, all schools were requested to participate in the Rebana Kercing competition to present the new Rebana Kercing performance by incorporating the new components with the original. With this, choreography and creative thinking skills were exercised. Winners of the competition received main prizes, and others received consolation prizes. It can be said that this program can increase the awareness of Rebana Kercing performance, which was once known as a Kampung Laut heritage that no one could have a chance to learn and practice. However, this activity created a sense of ownership that everyone can practice and appreciate this performance as part of Kelantan heritage. At this point, the concept of communal activity was emphasized. The new community was established in the academic setting.

Sustaining Rebana Kercing (Academic Collaboration)

Apart from the formation of the new Rebana Kercing community, this research proposes a teaching module that serves as guidance on how Rebana Kercing can be taught structurally, from dancing and singing to music playing. This study used a modular step-by-step lesson to Rebana Kercing performance in a module at the five schools where Rebana Kercing is taught, and the teachers involved were made familiar with the module. With the module as a guide, Rebana Kercing has been made a cocurricular activity in the schools, among other existing co-curricular activities. Similarly, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan uses the module as part of the subjects offered to students. The structured lesson is done part by part, starting from choosing the song, memorizing the lyrics, understanding the meaning, singing, and learning to play the music, followed by the dance, and in the end, all are combined.

This aspect of academic collaboration, which is training module development and making the performing art a cocurricular activity ensures a dying performing art like Rebana Kercing is sustained. Through the co-curricular activity, Rebana Kercing will be practised on a weekly basis at schools, and since there are several other schools that have Rebana Kercing as part of the co-curricular activities, a Rebana Kercing competition is deemed as relevant. Through constant practice and competition, Rebana Kercing's existence is more sustainable.

Module development that allows co-curricular activity, therefore, must come from academic intervention. In the case of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, the training module allowed school and faculty students to theoretically see the Rebana Kercing performance through its historical, social, religious and cultural aspects and learn the components of Rebana Kercing performance and its aesthetic. For the practical session, students would get the chance to be trained by the activists, among other trainers. The module would also indirectly allow them to see and suggest possible improvisations to the different aspects of their Rebana Kercing performance to make it more appealing to their anticipated audiences of the current generation by not compromising its identity. In the end, students will be able not just to perform Rebana Kercing but appreciate the performing art. With the teaching module, students were not trained only to perform, but they also can be cultural learners that able to create, analyze, criticize, or discuss this art performance with traditional and contemporary viewpoints.

As for Universiti Malaysia Kelantan students, especially those from the arts faculty, through academic collaboration, they had the opportunity to participate in the research fieldwork, which would allow first-hand cultural preservation experience rather than in-class theory. Students were invited to present the safeguarding methods for preserving Rebana Kercing by applying their analytical and critical thinking abilities.

Academic collaboration would also assist in proper documentation of a dying heritage like Rebana Kercing. The Preservation of the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut project, which has interviewed a number of activists, has documented many aspects of the Rebana Kercing performance, from its history, current situation, its association, the costumes, musical instruments, lyrics, rhythms, and the points of view of the people involved in the performance. This kind of documentation will add to the scarce literature and serve as a reference for future study or interest in Rebana Kercing.

Academic collaboration, therefore, serves as a platform that ensures the continuation of this dying art to be sustained.

Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has discussed the ways to sustain the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut performing art as a communal activity through academic collaboration. Enforcing Rebana Kercing as a communal activity is an important part of the preservation of this performing art and other arts of similar status. This is because they were indeed the local community's shared form of entertainment and a preservation project that does not consider this aspect will not restore to what it is supposed to be. Efforts to make a performing art communal has to be implemented, and as for Rebana Kercing, having an active association that upholds the art, in addition to training of trainers and training of trainees, contributed immensely to this aspect. Academic collaboration is indeed another great factor that can lead to the effective preservation of a dying performing art. Academic support can help revive

performing art and emphasize communal art so it can be shared, owned, preserved, and practised. In the case of Rebana Kercing, academic collaboration allows the utilization of academic experts in restructuring the traditional way of how Rebana Kercing is taught to a more structured method according to steps and modules. It is evident that academic collaboration can play a huge and effective role in preserving a dying art and sustaining it so it is learned and performed from time to time. The safeguarding methods presented in this paper can be applied to other performing arts that are dying.

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