CREATIVE DYNAMISM OF DIKIR BARAT
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Abstract

Although considered as ‘traditional,’ Dikir Barat is probably the ‘youngest’ among the more well known performing arts of Kelantan such as Menora, Mak Yong and Wayang Kulit. Started less than a century ago in Kota Bharu, its popularity has since spread across the nation, especially with the advent of television and audio recordings. Unlike the more complex and elaborate performance structure of Mak Yong and Wayang Kulit with their inherently imbued spiritual innuendos, Dikir Barat is largely secular and can be easily learnt. Some tradition evolves through time, and through this process that it maintains its viability. This is best exemplified by Dikir Barat, but what makes it such a dynamic and constantly evolving art form? This paper attempts to look into how Dikir Barat maintains its popularity and relevancy among the Malay populace of Kelantan amid its changing political, cultural and social situation.

Introduction

My ex-neighbour’s son in Kota Bharu was like any other young, twenty-something lad you would find in many cities throughout Malaysia. He loved fast cars, fancy clothes, and loud music – the effects of globalization. These are viewed as the symbols of success and modernity – of being ‘cool’ and ‘hip’. However, instead of the usual hip hop tunes thumping out of his Proton Wira’s speakers; the only clear down beat sounds were made by the gong – the gong of the dikir barat. How could a young man, living in an era of what Michael Ignatieff (1989) calls the ‘3-minute culture’, with satellite TV’s, YouTube, i-Phones, MTV; could be oblivious to the barrage of western music (including local mainstream tunes) and still listens to a musical genre almost a century old? Probably to him, and many others in Kelantan, it’s the coolest thing to do. After a number of encounters with the thundering sounds of dikir barat emanating from his car (sometimes as early as six in the morning), questions started to linger in my mind as to how this art form not only survive to this day but is gaining popularity among the younger generation.

Dikir barat is categorized as a traditional Malay art form originated from the east coast state of Kelantan (Mohd Ghazali Abdullah, 1995; Azmi Mohd Nasir, 2006). It involves solo and choral singing, hand clapping, synchronized body and hand movements (sometimes even dance) accompanied by percussion instruments. A dikir barat group is
Oral Tradition

Storytelling has been part of Kelantanese culture for generations. Traditional performing arts such as Tarik Selampit, Wayang Kuit, Mak Yong in Kelantan involve the telling of tales in transmitting knowledge while entertaining the audience. Grand narratives of Wayang Kuit and Mak Yong, derived from Hindu-Buddhist sources, have long influenced the Kelantanese worldview, albeit the deep rooted Islamic influences in the society. Mak Yong stories and characters are still being used in healing rituals such as Main Puteri, and seen as symbols of strength or causes for illnesses (see Hardwick, 2009).

Unlike Mak Yong and Wayang Kuit, where the audience is ‘taken’ on a mystical journey, dikir barat talks about mundane everyday life, with trivial matters such as marriage and family issues. Form the sacred to the profane; it mirrors the temporal nature of everyday life in Kelantan, in Schechnerian term, from the ‘rawness’ of life’s experiences, it is ‘cooked’ and presented in a ‘palatable’ way (Schechner, 2003). This is described by Zaharan Razak (2008):

"Perhaps one of the greatest appeals of dikir barat is its ability to look at a trivial subject or mundane object and bring it to life inviting the audience to look at the familiar with humour or in a new light. Dikir barat practitioners would rant and wail about water buffaloes running loose, frogs creating a ruckus in the night and house geckoes living their separate lives in human households... You will smile sheepishly, or knowingly, listening to Munirah (yes there are female practitioners too) taking a risqué dig at the lack of birth control in "Anak tok de besar, nok boleh hok lain pulok ..."
(zveloyak.blogspot.com)

Oral tradition forms the bedrock of the creative dynamism and sustainability of dikir barat, and as a symbolic continuation of the tradition in Kelantan. Its tales are weaved with such skill and spontaneity by the tukang karut, resembling a master dalang (puppeteer) of the old days. The use of the ‘witty Malay verses’ (Tan Sooi Beng, 2005) known as pantun or the Malay ‘quatrain’ (Ghulam Sanwar, 2004) and the act of berbalas pantun or verse debates between opposing tukang karut shows the deep rootedness of dikir barat in this ancient Malay literary expression.
"Tokde Besar" (The Child Has Yet To Grow), she sings about the need for birth control in society.

Anak Tokde Besar (The Child Has Yet To Grow)
Munirah

Anok tokde besar nak buleh hok lain pulok
baju kain tokde tukar anok ramai telajok
saloh bini pakai lawa pakai lecu pakai bedok
tido male tangan bergagar mula nak petat gosok
nikoh 3 tahun buleh anok 2 ore
anok hok sulung tu buleh anok jate
hok kecik buleh dukung hok besar buleh jale
dale perut duduk kandung edo pulok 9 bule

The child has yet to grow and you want another one
Clothes have yet to change too many children
Blame the wife for wearing beautifully with lipstick and powder
Sleeping at night with hands wandering start to touch and stroke
Married for 3 years can have 2 children
The eldest can be a son
The youngest can carry the elder and still walk
In the womb there's another one for 9 months

In “Lembu Tak Tambah” (Untied Cows), Cikgu Naim raised the issue of wandering cows encroaching into other people’s lands and eating their crops. These contemporary social issues highlighted with wit and humour, is one of the hallmarks of dikir barat.

Parody and Familiar Tunes
Dikir barat often uses lagu cedok or familiar melodies to accompany its songs. This is called Karut Matang and is one of the most important elements in dikir barat (Ahmad Fathi Ibrahim, 2007). These famous tunes include mainstream pop, Hindustani, Dangdut and traditional Malay songs which are normally rearranged and sung in Kelantanese. This is not dissimilar to what “Weird Al” Yankovic did to Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” during the 1980’s. Similar to Iban pop music in Sarawak, this parody of familiar songs goes down well with listeners, making them memorize the songs faster and easier. One example is Cikgu Sulizi’s “Beruntung Jadi Anak Kelantan” which is based on the traditional song “Jong Jong Inai”. 
Begapo namo nyo duk main
Napok duk getel woh timun bate
Here ayoh dio tu...

What were you playing
Saw you rubbing a cucumber
His father was baffled...

“Abe vs Adik” (Elder Brother vs Little Sister)
Pok Teh

ore jate dengan betino
samo tujuan gak nak seru
dok samo sore pakai jadi kerja
jate nak ke lube tino nok ke palo
tino buje jate tadok bini
mudoh la weii supo besi berani
abe gere adik pon ingin
sebetar seluar dale turun dok di keting

men and women
with the same similar objectives
when together alone, they’re up to something
man going for the ‘hole’, woman for the ‘head’
woman is a widow, man without a wife
it’s easy like a magnet
‘elder brother’ proposes and ‘little sister’ wants it
later the underwear will come down to the shin

While mere lyrics may not be enough to rouse the young, the world of dikir barat has its own raunchy VCD version, with girls doing the controversial and sexually provocative gerudi Inul dance\(^3\), a feat which no female artist dares to do in Kuala Lumpur. One such group is called Jagoh comprising of young female singers and has produced a series of hot selling VCD’s. Issues of authenticity were raised by dikir barat practitioners as to whether this new phenomenon is dikir barat or just lagu loghat daerah (Mastika, 2010). Although it may seem to deviate from the ‘original’ dikir barat, Farok Zakaria\(^4\) asserts that it is still considered as dikir barat, as a separate genre within the tradition (personal communication, 2010).

Although scorned by the authorities and members of the public, the existence and use of profanities in dikir barat shows the creative audacity of the Kelantanese. Similar to contemporary rap and hip hop music in the U.S., these sexually explicit lyrics and visuals have become part of the whole appeal of dikir barat, which resulted in its temporary proscription in 1998. Some argued that these lyrics have deeper meanings which are meant as social critiques, addressed to a particular audience that accepts it openly and light-heartedley.\(^5\)

\(^3\) A dance made famous by controversial Indonesian dangdut singer Inul
\(^4\) A professor at the Heritage Department, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan specializing in the performing arts of Kelantan
\(^5\) According to Mohd Nawi, the profanities are not meant to arouse but as a sincere and direct way of conveying a message in a song, which was well understood and received by the rural folks
Conclusion

In an interview with the Economist in 1995, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a Kelantan prince and Member of Parliament claimed that “in Malaysia’s quest for industrialisation, those in power accept any development, whatever the cost to the environment. In Kelantan we resist” (pp. 28-30). This resistance is also evident in the area of performing arts. When the federal government declared wayang kulit as a national art form in 1971, many practitioners resisted the attempt to sterilise and assimilate it into the national mainstream (Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006). However, this resistance to the west coast mainstream political and cultural hegemony was not apparent in the case of dikir barat, and this has contributed to its creative dynamism. While filling the vacuum left by the dying arts of Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit and Menora, as performative manifestation of Kelantanesse identity, dikir barat readily accepted the federal government’s involvement and assistance. Dikir barat competitions were organized regularly and even televised nationwide, allowing an avenue for greater creative expression and innovation – a chance to be national stars. Similar to the music of Latin America and the Caribbean, dikir barat was “cleaned up” and “modernized” to be elevated and accepted as a national cultural heritage (see Tan Sooi Beng, 2005). Intense competition and rivalry resulted in groups donning new glittering costumes and introducing new choreographies in their performances. Dikir barat is also being ‘shaped’ in Kelantan under the present PAS administration in its efforts to promote the all-encompassing Islamic cultural identity. In spite of this newly “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm, 2003:1) or cultural construct, one fundamental element remains unchanged though – the language.

The Kelantanese dialect, is assumed by Zuraidah Mohd Don (2003) as “being a central component in the ethnolinguistic formation for the people of Kelantan in the process of constructing an inclusive sense of statehood and also of maintaining membership of being Kelantanese” (pp. 55). This is crucial in the expansion of dikir barat as not only a traditional art form, but also as popular culture and in creating a new Kelantanese identity. It still gives the Kelantanese ‘authority’ over the art form and would determine its creative trajectory. The successes of Halim Yazid and Cikgu Sulizi in the national front have become the source of inspiration and symbols of pride for Kelantanese. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to overshadow the other countless dikir barat artists in its motherland, who are performing at grassroots levels while still addressing local issues – the very foundation in which dikir barat was built upon.

The myriad of issues and styles used in dikir barat has made it a vibrant and exciting art form. From traditional to popular, it has transformed itself and adapted to the political and social dynamics of its surroundings. Dikir barat may well be their last bastion and hope, the last man standing in the battle between traditional culture and beliefs, and the Islamic driven post-colonial social restructuring process in this era of a borderless world.