

DANCE AS A MEDIUM OF ISLAMIC TRANSFORMATION IN ACEH

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Abstrak

In Aceh, the culture has played an important role as means of dakwah. The idea which will be suggested in this study is related to the need of reinterpretation towards the existence of local culture of Aceh from more accommodative perspective in terms of practice, functions and its sub function in order to formulate the balance among worship, Islamic ethic and culture based on Syari'ah. So it can be implemented as instrument of communication in socio-religious aspect effectively, cheap and entertain for presenting Islamic message among the people of Aceh. It is important to be aware that in global era local people need a sharp instrument and relevant to communicate various kinds of Islamic values towards public to increase its spreading as wide as possible and also contribution for enlightening towards community. So, it is necessary to prepare a strategy for establishing means of sharp communication as had shown by amount of Islamic missionary in the past which applied dance as instrument to conduct their mission in archipelago. This writing is an effort to understand the value of the local culture especially Seudati dance as parts of the Aceh culture in accordance with phenomenology. It is meant that exploration of experience of participants towards culture events completely and explaining the meaning of local culture is priority to present local knowledge systematically to public. According to qualitative research, the process to understand the facts as study object was done as close as possible so the process to catch the meaning in it.

Keywords: Islam; media; arts and culture; Aceh

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to examine the existence of Acehese dance as a cultural element that has contributed to shaping a medium for transmitting values to the public in the past. The presence of various forms of dance in Acehese society reflects a creative culture within the local Islamic community, responding to the demands of the times by crafting effective strategies for communicating values to the public. This creativity lies in the ability to use dance as a vehicle for disseminating Islamic teachings within the local community in a more communicative manner. Even among Islamic mystics, dance has been employed to convey deeper mystical values (Michon, 2003).

In Aceh, some time ago, dance played a crucial role as a medium for the socialization of Islamic teachings within the community. This perspective underscores the social and religious significance of studying the existence of dance in Aceh. Acehese dance embodies Islamic values, integrating constitutive symbols that express these values through speech, movement, and attire in a harmonious manner (Syamsuar, *et al.*, 2019).

In various literatures, the *Seudati* dance is noted to have been used by the Saman order to convey Islamic messages to the people (Sri Mulyati, 2004). This dance medium arrived with

the spread of Islam in Aceh, as mentioned in the book on Acehese art: “The Seudati dance grew along with the coming of Islam in the Aceh region. This dance was a medium utilized by Islamic missionaries to spread the religion in Aceh.” Seudati was also used by Acehese rulers and Islamic missionaries in the past to communicate important messages to the public.

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic method to uncover the cultural meanings, as suggested by Roger M. Keesing (Keesing, 1998). The research includes observations of references and visual documents on Acehese cultural arts, as well as interviews with leaders of Acehese cultural art studios. The significance of this paper lies in its attempt to explain how dance, particularly the *Seudati* dance, contributes to building the identity of Acehese society as a Muslim community. Thus, dance as a cultural element should not only be viewed from an aesthetic perspective, but also, more importantly, for its role in facilitating the transformation of values within the community in a global era (Salam, 2004).

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods to explore the cultural meanings of Aceh, based on the perspectives of Roger M. Keesing. This approach involves observing various references and visual documents, such as artworks, photographs, and video recordings related to Acehese culture, with the goal of understanding how cultural values are reflected in visual forms. These observations are supplemented by in-depth interviews with leaders of Acehese cultural art studios as primary sources, providing direct insights into Acehese art and cultural values. The data obtained from observations and interviews are analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and cultural meanings embedded within. This method aims to offer a deeper understanding of the arts and cultural values that shape Acehese cultural identity, while also illustrating ways these values are preserved within the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Aceh Cultural Arts

Culture encompasses all human capacities mobilized to respond to the demands of various aspects of life. Concretely, culture can refer to the customs practiced by a society in daily life, such as oral traditions, artworks, language, interaction patterns, and so on. In other words, culture represents the complex reality of humanity, which, while possessing unique characteristics to a certain extent, also has universal traits (Tilaar, 2002; Usman, 2003; Tibi, 1999). Art, meanwhile, is a human creation that embodies beauty, goodness, and truth in expressing an internal sense of aesthetics. Therefore, cultural art can be understood as an expression of human appreciation for beauty in perceiving the external environment, which is an activity within the cultural formation process itself.

Several dance scholars also argue that there is a strong connection between dance and the identity of an ethnic group. For instance, dancers wearing traditional saris are almost universally recognized as performing an Indian dance, while belly dancing with an exposed midriff is easily associated with the Middle East. Similarly, in the Indonesian archipelago, dances such as the *Tari Lilin* are readily identified with West Sumatra, *Tari Pendet* with Bali, and *Seudati* with Aceh. Thus, cultural arts serve as an identity marker of an ethnic group (Hendra Putranto, 2008). This is because cultural arts also reflect the values held by that ethnic group. By examining cultural arts, one can gain insight into the values embedded in their way of life and customs, fostering intercultural communication to build a harmonious society through mutual understanding among communities (Alo Liliweri, 2005).

The uniqueness of Acehese dance lies in its foundation in Islam, as almost all of its dances convey Islamic teachings to the audience. Thus, some view Acehese dance as playing a role in the Islamization of the local population (Group, 2005). In the realm of art, Islamic elements are dominant. Each art form is imbued with Islamic values, as seen in greetings or written expressions beginning with phrases such as *salam* or *bismillah*. Likewise, Acehese art is filled with expressions of heroic and patriotic spirit, rooted in Islamic values (Zakaria Ahmad, 2008). Aceh, as an important center for the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, has developed a unique cultural identity. This uniqueness lies in a paradigm and standards drawn from Islamic teachings, which serve as guidelines for behavior in all aspects of life, including cultural arts. This identity has shaped nearly all of Aceh's cultural value systems, which continue to influence the community's social systems, customs, way of life, education system, and various forms of art (Rusdi Sufi, 2007).

Acehnese cultural arts cover a broad spectrum, not only found in dance but also in vocal arts, literature (both general and mystical), and combat arts. In addition to combat strategies, even the weaponry incorporates artistic carvings, often inscribed with Quranic verses, as seen in the traditional weapon known as the *rencong* (Syamsuddin & Abbas, 1981). This phenomenon is attributed to the many challenges the Acehese people have faced, especially in terms of prolonged colonization and conflict (Sri Suyanta, 2008). As a result, many poems and dance movements are infused with symbols of heroism and valor in resistance, such as those expressed in the *Seudati* dance. The *Seudati* dance reflects various symbols of sophisticated wartime strategies for facing and deceiving enemies, which can be observed in the dance's different formats. In relation to poetic expression, a well-known hikayat (epic poem) in the Acehese resistance tradition is *Prang Sabi*, written by an Acehese scholar to boost the fighting spirit of Acehese warriors heading to the battlefield (Hasbi Amiruddin, 2007).

The Acehese people are also known as a poetic ethnic group, with a deep appreciation for rhymed words over ordinary prose. In their oral tradition, particularly in educational aspects, there is a genre known as *hadih maja* (Harun, 2009). Many poets memorize favored hikayat, reciting them at important gatherings. Among the regions in the Indonesian archipelago, Aceh is recognized as one of the richest in literary heritage, according to Aboebakar Atjeh (Aboebakar Atjeh, 1970).

Acehnese Value Paradigm

The presence and values of dance within a society are closely linked to the cultural paradigm embraced by that society (Agus Salim, 2006; Atmadja, 2004). Therefore, the values associated with belly dancing in Egypt differ from those of the Seudati dance in Aceh. Belly dancing is intended for entertainment without concern for its appropriateness from an Islamic perspective. In contrast, the Seudati dance and other forms of dance in Acehese society are generally intended to communicate Islamic teachings. Aceh, which has been influenced by Islam for centuries, finds it challenging to separate itself from the impact of Islamic-oriented culture in various aspects as it responds to social demands (Aboebakar Atjeh, 1970).

After the legalization of Sharia law in Aceh by the Indonesian government, supported by Law No. 44 of 1999 and Law No. 18 of 2001 concerning special autonomy and the implementation of Sharia in Aceh, as well as additional supporting *qanun* (Nway, 2009), it has become increasingly important to consider the strategic preparations and instruments that may strengthen Sharia implementation in Aceh. One instrument critical to the successful socialization of Sharia is the communication medium used to convey Islamic messages to the public. A practical and accessible means for this purpose is utilizing local cultural arts, such as

dance, to communicate Islamic messages to society. By elevating the role of dance in Islamic outreach, the initial acceptance of these messages by the cultural community is facilitated.

In the past, Islamic missionaries not only employed tarekat (Sufi orders) but also utilized dance and local wisdom as instruments for a specific system of social control, particularly in disseminating Islamic values aligned with the characteristics of the local community. This approach aimed for each member of society to adhere to established norms, thus preserving social order. To achieve this, a mechanism to strengthen social resilience and control systems is required.

Culture can play a strategic role in maintaining the identity of a community, whether ethnic or national, by ensuring the transformation of values across generations (Mudji Sutrisno, 2006; Syamsuar & Rizki, 2004; Rizki et al., 2004). Thus, cultural social control can be both preventive and repressive. Preventive social control is an effort to prevent violations of societal norms, while repressive control aims to restore harmony to norms disrupted by shifts in values. The awareness of the need to revitalize the process of social-religious value transformation must be continuously maintained if the community is genuinely committed to building a society rooted in religious teachings.

The *Seudati* dance holds a particular appeal for some in Aceh because it encapsulates dense social-religious values that reflect the Acehnese value system itself. The significance of *Seudati* becomes even more compelling when analyzed from multiple perspectives. In terms of format, the structure of its poetry, and the context of its performance, *Seudati* exemplifies the ingenuity of its designers as a social-religious communication instrument. Each component of the *Seudati* dance—including its format, movements, poetry, and attire—symbolizes messages embedded in Islamic values.

Value Transformation

Values are a crucial aspect of a Muslim's life, guiding all activities in accordance with Islamic teachings. Given the significant position of values in Islam, disregarding the role of instruments in the process of value transformation implies a lack of clarity about strategies for building and communicating these values to society.

From the author's perspective, the importance of values is equal to that of the instruments that communicate them, as values and instruments are closely connected in cultivating human aesthetics. This may be seen as a collective responsibility of a society that understands the directed functions of values and culture. For this purpose, cultural intelligence is essential, enabling individuals to detect and interpret the direction of cultural development and its implications for their lives today and in the future.

The Acehnese approach to transferring values within their community employs at least two methods. First, the socio-religious approach, which utilizes various media such as *meunasah* (village hall), *bale* (pavilion), *dayah* (Islamic boarding school), mosques, *dike*, and *meurukon* (group recitations). Second, the cultural-arts approach, which takes a more aesthetic route through dance, carving, *hadih maja* (proverbial sayings), and vocal arts.

In Acehnese society, values are embodied within customs and traditions. These customs and traditions are accepted and practiced by community members to such an extent that they become part of their character. The function of values within customs or traditions has a more effective impact than formal institutional control (Harun, 2009). The statements above reinforce the importance of media or instruments that foster aesthetic elements within people grounded in Sharia values. Therefore, the interpretation of Sharia should be expressed within

a framework of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all worlds). In its simplest sense, the author aims to convey that the spirit of Sharia should encourage society to develop its potential, including in cultural arts. Thus, the development of cultural arts is not based on specific *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) but rather on the motivating spirit of Sharia (Ibrahim, 2008).

Dance Art as a Media of Acehnese Values

Throughout the nation's history, dance has played a significant role in shaping the value systems and identity of the nation in the global community. Similarly, in Islam, dance has historically served as a tool for dakwah (Islamic outreach), communicating Islamic values to society with an aesthetic touch, while still being recognized for its substantial social value and role (Sumardio, 2005).

Dance, as a medium of value communication, can strengthen social bonds, as it not only expresses beauty but also serves as a symbol of a community's identity in social interaction. Social interaction among individuals fosters social attitudes, implying mutual influence between individuals, which ultimately gives rise to complex behavioral patterns. These patterns are shaped by personal experiences, family, and group influences, which coalesce into social attitudes (Azhar, 2005).

In relation to the description of dance above, the author posits that Acehnese dance is a sequence of integrated movements accompanied by vocal rhythms, body music, instrumental music, and attire as an expression of Acehnese identity and their adherence to life values. Thus, Acehnese dance, from a social perspective, aligns with the concept of superstructure, where dance is an essential aspect of human life because it communicates transcendent values.

Dance is introduced to society as an aesthetic consciousness by its creators. Its presence is therefore not independent; it is interconnected with both textual and contextual aspects. From a textual approach, one can understand the form and technique of a dance, while from a contextual approach, one can interpret it in relation to sociology and anthropology. From this perspective, dance possesses strong social and cultural relevance, as it is an inherent and integral part of the dynamics of social life (Sumardio, 2005). Dance is not only viewed as an expression of human aesthetic sensibility but also as a means through which humanity expresses many things.

1. Dance as Fun
2. Dance as a Means of Communication
3. Dance as a symbol
4. Dance as an Instrument of Da'wah

The existence of instruments to communicate messages or values occupies a quite strategic position in the success of da'wah missions. The Islamic messages that the Prophet Muhammad brought and passed on by his Shahabat really have a high allure and charm, even the Prophet himself is full of charm and admiration. Islam at the time of the Prophet was really an attractive and alluring Islam, not only because of its teachings that became *rahmatan lil alamin* but also because the behavior of Muslims was indeed attractive (Sumardio, 2005).

The messages conveyed in the dance can be in the form of religious, customary or development messages from the government to the community. Therefore, the author argues that the approach of cultural arts in communicating various values to the community will be more adaptive, because interested parties, whether the government or other parties have used instruments that are part of the life of the community itself, so that it will be very

communicative. Such a practice will also develop various potentials of dance art as a local culture that can be packaged as an art product that has a selling value.

Acehnese art is generally divided into several forms. Literary art, folklore art, carving art and dance art. The characteristics of Acehnese dance according to Kesurna are:

1. Breathe Islam
2. Danced by people
3. Relatively many repetitions of similar movements
4. Long serving duration
5. A combination of dance, music and literature
6. Limited floor pattern
7. In the early days of its growth, it was presented in special activities in the form of ceremonies.
8. Limited gestures (ismuha, 1988).

Acehnese art, especially dance, seems to have made Islam the spirit of its formation. In addition, Acehnese art is also appreciated by the social and political environment. This reality can be seen in dance, literary art, theater art and sound art. There is almost no Acehnese art that is not influenced by Islamic elements. Islamic values are expressed by themselves in art. Likewise, the urnum dancers are demonstrated by one gender in one squad. If there are men, they are only leaders and will not touch and hold hands.

Acehnese arts in addition to expressing culture also implies that through art, religion can be broadcast and developed. Therefore, Islam in Acehnese society has become a culture. This is what makes Islam in Aceh difficult to separate from society because it has become a custom that is rooted in the paradigm of behavior for them. The implementation of various traditions in society such as moving to a new house, the tradition of welcoming the birth of a child or various commemorations of Islamic holidays is carried out more because of traditional factors than spiritual awareness. This certainly has a plus-minus value. The plus point is that cultural Islam is an Islam that is almost impossible to remove from the midst of society because it has strong enough roots, while the minus is that it is found a little difficult to distinguish which are the true teachings of Islam and which are the result of human creativity.

Today, the development of Acehnese art can support the development of Aceh's identity and image itself, because indeed Acehnese dance art reflects the culture of the Acehnese people who have a strong foundation of Islamic values. The development of Acehnese art is not only carried out in the region, but can also be carried out in other regions at home and abroad. This will be able to provide a different value to Acehnese dance art compared to dance arts from other regions and will add its own competitiveness in cultural arts competitions in building the identity and development of Acehnese art today. That is, of course, if Acehnese art is it. received attention and support from the government and the people of Aceh, especially those who care about the sustainability of the arts and culture.

Seudati Dance Social Media Religious

Seudati has an inherent appeal due to its rich socio-religious values. The significance of *Seudati* becomes even more intriguing when analyzed from various perspectives. Its format, the structure of its lyrics, and the context of its performance reflect the creativity of *Seudati*'s designers in crafting it as a medium for socio-religious communication. Regarding the origin and meaning of *Seudati*, there are several explanations. In the Acehnese language, *Seudati* means a dance performed by eight individuals, with each dancer holding a specific title. According to Aboebakar Atjeh, *Seudati* originated from the Sufi community and was popularized by Sheikh Tarekat Samman. Hence, in the Acehnese language, *Seudati* is also known as *Meusamman*. The term *Seudati* derives from the Sufi phrase *ya sadati*, which means "O Master."

Another perspective suggests that Seudati originates from the Arabic word *syahadatain*, which refers to the two testimonies of faith in Islam. The dance aims to invite its audience to embrace Islam, beginning with the recitation of the *syahadatain*, which, in the Acehese dialect, became *Seudati*.

In its early days, the verses in this dance consisted of religious chants and Islamic poetry. This religious aspect is especially evident in *Rateb Saman*. Both *Rateb Saman*, originally used solely for the recitation of the life of Sheikh Samman and remembrance (*zikr*), and *Rateb Mensa*, from the Syattariyah order, along with *Rateb Sadati*, initially served religious purposes before evolving into popular folk art in Aceh. The format shifted into a dance form, and the chants were transformed into verses aligned with the dance's intended message.

The movements of Seudati were inspired by the passionate and brave actions of warriors entering the battlefield with confidence and courage. Seudati embodies the heroic spirit of Acehese soldiers as they faced various foreign interventions threatening Aceh's sovereignty at the time. It is the most popular and well-loved dance in Aceh, distinguished as a special dance. Its popularity has spread throughout Indonesia and even internationally.

In addition to serving as a cultural communication tool, Seudati also contains cultural values beneficial for public enlightenment in Aceh. In other words, Seudati was once a medium used by Acehese rulers in the past to educate their society. According to historical research and expert opinions, Seudati emerged alongside the arrival of Islam in Aceh. In the past, it was used by Islamic preachers as a medium to spread Islam in Aceh. Before transforming into *Seudati*, the dance was known as *rato*, which means to tell stories related to social aspects, such as tales of sorrow or joy, stories that inspire the spirit of struggle, or provide moral advice.

Most Islamic preachers who spread the religion in Aceh were of Arab descent or had a background in religious education, using Arabic as the primary language. Therefore, the terms used in the dissemination of Islam adhered to Arabic terminology. *Rato*, as a medium from the past, was significantly influenced by Arabic terms. For example, terms like *syahadati*, *syahadatain*, and *saman* (meaning eight individuals) are still used today. Historically, *Seudati* emerged in the Pidie and North Aceh districts, though it has since spread to various regions across Aceh.

CONCLUSION

The meaning in the *seudati dance* is inseparable from the influence of Islamic values from the process of its formation to appearing in front of the public, because *seudati* is indeed presented as an instrument of *da'wah* by its creator. This dance is also influenced by the political and social conditions that are ongoing in the Acehese community. Political influence in the dance can be found in dynamic and strategic war strategies, such as changes in the formation of dance movements and the command system in giving orders to dance members.

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