THE HISTORY OF RAPA’I DABÔH IN ACEH

Anwar Daud, Fauzi Ismail, Abdul Manan, Saprijal

Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh
Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Al Washliyah Banda Aceh

anwar.daud@ar-raniry.ac.id, fauzi68@ar-raniry.ac.id, abdul.manan@ar-raniry.ac.id, saprijal@ar-raniry.ac.id

Abstract: Rapa’i dabôh is a traditional art played by 12 people accompanied with risky attractions using sharp objects namely knife, sword, chainsaw, chain, sharpened bamboo and many else. The aim of this study is to find out the history of rapa’i dabôh in Aceh. The instruments used in this research are observation, interview and documentation. Techniques of data analysis are data reduction, data display and data verification/conclusion. The study revealed that the history of rapa’i dabôh in Aceh was from a prominent ulama named Syekh Abdul Qadir Jailani inherited by Syekh Rafa’i, popularly recognised later as Tarekat Rifa’iyyah. Rapa’i dabôh was early formerly used as media for preaching the Islamic teaching, but later it developed into an art fancied by most the Acehnese people. The spread of rapa’i dabôh was carried by the preachers from north-eastern to southwest-southern part of Aceh, then it inspired many groups of performance such as Rincong Pusaka at Ie Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan, Southwest Aceh and Putra Naga at Mutiara village, Sawang, South Aceh. Both groups still exist until today.

Keywords: history; rapa’i dabôh; Aceh

A. Background of Study

Aceh province is one of the most remote areas on the island of Sumatra, Aceh is also known as the early area of Islamic development in the archipelago. The Aceh area is inhabited by several tribes such as the Acehnese, Aneuk Jame, Klut, Alas, Siemeulue,
Singkil, Tamiang, and Gayo tribes. During the development of Islam in Aceh, traditional arts that used musical instruments such as tambourines of various shapes and sizes were used by Sufi scholars as a medium of da’wah. The type of musical instrument tambourine has become a hallmark of other music with Islamic nuances in the archipelago and in countries where the population is predominantly Muslim.

The spread of Islamic teaching can be obviously seen through the art performance in every local tribe in Aceh starting from north coastal area, eastern until south western coastal area. Each part of area owns various art of rapa’i, namely rapa’i uroh and rapa’i lagee from North Aceh, rapa’i geurimpheng in Pidie, rapa’i geleng in South Aceh and rapa’i dabôh (debus) from Southwest Aceh. Rapa’i refers to a percussion instrument of the Acehnese traditional played by hitting using hands without any use of other media. Rapa’i is commonly played by the Acehnese people as entertainment in procession of traditional ceremony in Aceh such as: wedding party, circumcision (sunat rasul), fair or night market, for accompanying the dance, anniversary, birthday and so on.

Aceh was long recognised with its diverse arts and culture like dance art, music, sculpture and literature. Those art are inseparable with Hinduism and Buddhist teaching, long before Islam arrived in Aceh. Traditional art like rapa’i dabôh (debus) is an expression of locals which contains special values of religion, culture, education, moral, beauty, economy and tradition that are still continuously developing in the midst of Acehnese society. The art of rapa’i dabôh is a social phenomenon in society that has become an artistic heritage as an Acehnese cultural asset handed down by the ancestors. The meaning and message are delivered in the form of lyric in every movement and hit. In doing this, it is led by a syekh (leader) referring to someone who leads the procession of rapa’i dabôh and assisted by the companions in coordinating the members in every play.

The brief history of rapa’i dabôh existence in Aceh was firstly introduced by students of Syekh Abdul Qadir Al-Jailani, one of major ulama in Baghdad (now Iraq).

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1Ediwar, “Reconstruction and Revitalization of Rapa'i Acehnese Arts after the Tsunami”, (Institute of the Indonesian Arts (ISI), Padang Panjang, Recital, Vol. 17 No. 1, April 2016), 30-31.
who led one big tarekat muktabar called Tarekat Qadiriyah. In this case, Aceh becomes one of targets in spreading the Islamic teaching and other knowledge, one of them was the skill of dabôh (makrifat) to the Acehnese people at that time. The play of rapa’i dabôh positively affects people’s belief towards the mighty of God who blesses someone to be invulnerable or endured of puncture of sharp objects that can be seen clearly through eyes in every movement and stabs in some parts of body such as on tight, eyes, hands, belly, legs, head, tongue and others. This practice can be done openly that can shock and frighten the audiences. The scream and applause will gain the spirit of the players of rapa’i dabôh.

Group of rapa’i dabôh consists of one syekh entitled as khalifah or leader, 2 figures as companion of syekh to assist accompanying the lyric or radat, and there are members from the hitter of rapa’i (tambourine) and some players playing with weapons like machete, rencong (small dagger of the Acehnese traditional weapon), knife, chain, sword, wood, chainsaw and many else. When the players hit the rapa’i (tambourine), it is ornamented with the special lyrical songs, meanwhile the players playing with the sharpened weapons will keep stabbing continuously their parts of body strongly and should follow the rhythm of rapa’i and suddenly we can see those sharpened weapons are getting broken and bent. All of the views are under the power of Allah under the control of a syekh as the leader during the procession of rapa’i dabôh.

The presence of rapa’i dabôh art amongst society currently is getting faded, this is because the less interest of youth to preserve and maintain the local culture. This is also caused by the existence of foreign culture. This was explained in the thesis conducted by HeruYulianda Miraza, The Existence of Rapa’i Debus in Local Culture Values at Batu Hitam Village, Tapaktuan, Aceh Selatan. The play was described in thesis conducted by Enda Risma, entitled The Social Values in Rapa’i Debus in Simeulue Barat Sub-District. The art of rapa’i debus contains the religious values that can be seen from the players’ uniformity in forming the religious rituals, such as saying greeting, fasting, may not do bad deeds like gambling drinking alcohol, as a condition in playing the art of rapa’i debus. There is also value of integrity from the discipline...
shown by the players, honesty, responsibility and solidarity, also can be found from the cooperation of players to create the sense of unity within the team. From the explanation above, it seems to be interestingly worth it to restudy the history of *rapa’i dabo’h* in Aceh, especially in Southwest Aceh and South Aceh.

**B. Research Methodology**

This study belongs to qualitative study that combines the library and field data. The data was collected from participant observation, in-depth interview and documentation. The data analysis used in this study is from theory of Miles and Huberman (1992). All the data that have been collected later would be analysed through data reduction (selecting, simplifying, and classifying the data) and data display (organising and visualising the data). From all the categorised data that have been reduced and displayed then would be drawn its conclusion.

**C. Finding and Discussion**

*Rapa’i* is a traditional musical instrument, made from dried goat skin, wood and detention center which have their respective functions such as goat skin as a punching area, wood as a reinforcement/resistance and detention center as a leather binder with wood so that it is not easily separated and beautify your voice. Tamrin revealed that the *rapa’i* is a medium-sized round so that it is easy for players to hold it with their left and right hands. The sound of the *rapa’i* when it is hit is so loud that it creates a happy atmosphere around it. *Rapa’i* is understood by the Acehnese in general as a musical instrument made of jackfruit wood or *merbau* wood, while the skin is made of processed goat skin, the body of *rapa’i* is called *Paloh* or *Baloh*. As for *rapa’i* as a game group consisting of 12 to 15 people or more called *rapa’i* crew. In the group of *Rapa’i* Rincong Pusaka has 12 players, 1 sheikh (as the leader of the *rapa’i* group) and 2 people as assistants to the sheikh in reading radat or poetry when the *rapa’i* performance begins.

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8 Interview with Tamrin, an artist/activist of traditional arts in Southwest Aceh in August, 2021.
9 Maulia Miranti, "Rapa’i Daboh Dance at the Garuda Mas Studio, Sungai Pauh Village, Langsa City". Online Journal, Medan, 2013.
Dabôh is a tool or sharp object used to display attractions accompanied by rapa’i blows. Hasanul explained that the sharp object used for dabôh had been “qadam” or tamed by the sheikh before being used by the players and spectators who participated in performing the attraction in front of the crowd. The object is a small, medium-sized knife, a chain and a straight iron that has been sharpened. In fact, there are many other sharp objects such as saws, razor blades and others.

Historically, rapa’i has already existed long time ago, in the thirteenth century, simultaneously with the arrival of Islam in Aceh which later became one of media used to spread the Islamic teaching. Then, it was developed into one form of art that has socio-cultural function in the regime of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The musical instrument of rapa’i is a form of acculturated culture of Islam in Aceh carried by ulama and muslim traders from middle east through world trade route crossing Central Asia like Pakistan and India. Another resource, the music of rapa’i was carried by one prominent ulama of tasawuf from Iraq, Baghdad named Syekh Ahmad Rifa’i whom later was known with his rifaiyyah tarekat developed until today, especially in Aceh.

During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, rapa’i instrument was often used as the need for welcoming the royal guests, which later becomes one popular form of culture of Islamic society in Aceh. Various kinds of musical instruments like rebana, has similar appearance with rapa’i. Even almost in every instrument used to accompany the celebration of major Islamic days like maulid the Prophet Muhammad and Isra Mi’raj. The name of rapa’i itself was derived from one of famous ulama in Arab that spread the Islamic teaching through dakwah which used the musical instrument in the form of a percussion drum frame similar to a tambourine with one surface which is played by hitting or tapping which is then spread by his followers throughout the archipelago and even to Aceh.

On statement stated by Sudirman, that rapa’i was introduced by one popular ulama born in Persia, named Syekh Abdul Qadir Jailani that was later popularly nicknamed as Bandar Khalifah. He firstly came to Aceh and stayed at Pande village, now is located in Mesjid Raya Baiturrahman sub-district, Banda Aceh. There was also

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10 Interview with Hasanul, a rapa’i dabôh member of Rincong Pusaka in Southwest Aceh, August 2021.
12 The interview with Sudirman, an activist of rapa’i dabôh from South Aceh, 2021.
story of Abdul Qadir along with Syekh Abdul Rauf who preached through the art of *rapa’i dabôh* in Aceh by chanting beautiful poems and prayers and blessings. The shape of *rapa’i* in Aceh basically looks similar to *rebana* (tambourine) with one side/surface made of wood and covered by goat skin or buffalo used as music companion for *meudike* or *dhikr* to inspirit the followers of Islamic teaching in order to always remember Allah who rules the whole universe in the form of socialization of Islamic teaching in the midst of Acehnese society.

*Rapa’i* was also written in some Acehnese literatures written by some *ulama* coming and settling in Aceh in around 16th and 17th century. One of the *ulama* and great writer coming from Malay was Hamzah Fansuri. He studied Islam under Qadariyah teaching located in Arab which later was spread in Aceh and it was followed by Ahmad Qushashi and Muhammad Samanyang around 1661. Then, the spread of Islam was continued by one *ulama* whom became part of his family, that was Syekh Abdurrauf As-Singkili who was popularly called as Syiah Kuala. The name was later used for Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh. Syekh Abdurrauf did not only produce one teaching that provided inputs for guideline of law in Aceh. Additionally, it also gave one form of cultural art of Islam in Aceh known as “*dike*” or *dhikr*.

In an Acehnese literary poetry about *rapa’i* as follows: “*Di langet manyang bintang meuble-meuble cahya ban kande leumah u bumoe, asai rapa’i bak Syekh Abdul Kade masa nyanpon lahe peutreun u bumoe*”. It means: “In the sky-high stars twinkling light like candles radiating to the earth, the origin of *rapa’i* from Sheikh Abdul Qadir at that time was born to earth”. In that poetry contains the meaning that *rapa’i* has a crucial role as popular form of the art and as the media to spread the Islamic teaching that enlighten the people of Aceh. It carries people from the era of ignorance to become educated and intelligent generation and a bright nation under the light of Islam.

In another story was also explained by Ampon Ubit, that *rapa’i dabôh* was developed by the “twelve syeikh” (12 syeikh) those are *ulama* who were sent by Turkey Utsmani empire to spread the Islamic teaching in Southeast Asian areas, especially in Aceh. The twelve Syeikh was led by Syeikh Abdul Kadir Al-Jailani, Syeikh Ibnu Mulkham, Syeikh Muhammad Amin, Syeikh Balul Kia, Syeikh Ibnu Affan, Syeikh

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Jalaluddin, Syeikh Ibnu Kasem, Syeikh Nuruddin, Syeikh Samion, Syeikh Ibnu Anwar, Syeikh Bukhari and Syeikh Hasanuddin.\textsuperscript{14} Those \textit{ulama} were spread in whole Aceh with the mission to spread the Islamic teaching through \textit{tasawuf} approaches. To expedite the preaching his \textit{dakwah}, the use of \textit{rapa’i dabôh} was used effectively accompanied with the lyrical poem containing the Islamic values that can attract many people. During the show, there is also some attraction of invulnerability by hitting and stabbing the sharpened objects to the body ornamented by the typical music of \textit{rapa’i}. The main purpose of the show is to invite people’s curiosity who eventually to the desire of knowing Islamic teaching through \textit{rapa’i dabôh}.\textsuperscript{15}

In the history of the spread of Islamic teaching in Aceh, \textit{ulama} do their \textit{dakwah}, one of them through the art delivered through the value of monotheism (\textit{tauhid}), \textit{ma’rifat} and others. Therefore, the procession of \textit{rapa’i dabôh} shows something that is prohibited because of the attempts of hurting and injuring the body, but in reality, it does not work that way. It is more like complementing and gratitude to the presence of Allah, that sharp objects cannot hurt the body. Nevertheless, there is also the taboo or prohibition that should be remembered by all members and players of \textit{dabôh} that they should not be \textit{riya’} or arrogant, because it can harm themselves. During Dutch colonialization, \textit{rapa’i dabôh} was used as place to develop the tenet of Islam of Sufism in order to enhance people’s spirit in fighting the colonialists in Aceh. Today, \textit{rapa’i dabôh} is played in the middle of society, but in different nuance. However, the presence of the \textit{rapa’i} still remains the same as the media to spread the Islamic teaching through art that is shown in certain events.\textsuperscript{16}

In today’s generation, \textit{rapa’i dabôh} directs to the art that has the uniqueness that is played and shown in the form of invulnerability test. This was mentioned by Kasem, saying that \textit{rapa’i dabôh} was often competed by inviting many groups of \textit{rapa’i} from many areas, especially in Southwest Aceh and South Aceh. The ancestor used to benefit this invulnerability (\textit{ilmu kebal}) to fight against Dutch, that they were fearless from the disbeliever (\textit{orang kafîr}), even though they sacrificed their lives to defend the country.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14}Interview with Ampon Ubit, a \textit{khalifah rapa’i dabôh} Rincong Pusaka, Ie Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest Aceh, 16 August 2021. \textsuperscript{15}Teuku Dadok, \textit{Bunga Rampai: Seni dan Budaya}, (Banda Aceh: Pena, 2017), 11. \textsuperscript{16}Interview with Abdurrahman, the companion of syekh of \textit{rapa’i dabôh} Rincong Pusaka in Ie Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest Aceh, 16 August 2021.}
Anwar Daud, Fauzi Ismail, Abdul Manan, Saprijal: The History of Rapa’i Dabôh in Aceh

The Acehnese heroes were believed to have the power of invulnerability such as Tengku Amir, Teuku Cut Ali, Panglima Rajo Lelo, Tengku Ali Usuh and Mat Sisir fighting against Dutch colonialization. However, they eventually died due to attitude of arrogance or riya’ in their mind.

D. Rapa’i Dabôh in Southwest Region

The beginning of spread and development of rapa’i dabôh in southwest areas cannot be separated from the role of ulama from northeast area. At first, in that area there was already a rapa’i dabôh then it was given the name rapa’i pasee, because the rapa’i group was located in the Pasee area of North Aceh. Then, it continues to be broadened into most of Aceh, especially in south west region. This was also mentioned by Zainal Abidin, saying that the presence of rapa’i becomes of the conclusive evidences that it has been well preserved in south west area until today. There many groups of rapa’i in south southwest region, even in every sub-district, there is one group with complete members. The influence of modern era makes youths are less interested in traditional art. Now, there are only few left that are still active like Rincong Pusaka group at Le Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest Aceh and Putra Naga group from Mutiara village, Sawang sub-district, South Aceh led by Syeikh Hatta. Both groups of rapa’i become the object of this study considering the groups are still active performing the procession, complete with all the players and members until today.

The origin of Rincong Pusaka group of rapa’i was carried by khalifah Moli coming from South Aceh where Southwest Aceh and South Aceh were once still one part of district until the extension in 2002. From that extension, Southwest has its own governmental system, customs, arts and many else. In terms of art, rapa’i dabôh in Southwest Aceh still has similar features to the one from Aceh Selatan. As mentioned by Zamzami, rapa’i dabôh of Rincong Pusaka still actively performs with its 15 permanent members and now is being passed to his children, Syeikh Yong. Meanwhile, the rapa’i group of Putra Naga from Mutiara village, Sawang, South Aceh

\[\text{17} \text{Interview with Kasem, an art history observer in South Aceh, August 2021.}\]
\[\text{18} \text{Beni Andika \\& Fani Dila Sar, Keberadaan Rapa’i daboh Grup Bungong Sitangkee Sebagai Reproduksi Budaya di Perkampungan Bekas Evakuasi Korban Pasca Tsunami Aceh", Jurusan Seni Pertunjukan Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia (ISBI) Aceh. Jurnal Seni Rupa, Volume 08 Nomor 02 ISSN: 2301-5942. 23911, Aceh Besar, 2019.}\]
\[\text{19} \text{Interview with Zainal Abidin, a syekh/khalifah of Putra Naga group, Mutiara village, Sawang, South Aceh, August 2021.}\]
\[\text{20} \text{Interview with Zamzami, the guardian of culture of Southwest Aceh, September 2021.}\]
is originally from Kota Fajar. As mentioned by Kaipal Wahyudi, that group remains active until today and has 12 active players and has ever participated in Aceh Cultural Week (PKA) in Banda Aceh. The main difference of both groups is identified from the lyric or radat, number of players and they do not use the verse of poem in every performance, either in single performance or contest competed with other groups. In the procession, meanwhile, remains the same with Mutiara group in terms of procedures and steps, the shape of sitting circumference of its players and the attractions during the performance of rapa’i dabôh. The unique thing of both groups is coming from the spiritual skills when using sharp weapons with various dexterity and testing them in front of audiences.

E. Conclusion

The history of rapa’i dabôh existence in Aceh was carried by great ulama named Syeikh Abdul Qadir Jailani inherited by Syeikh Rifa’i which was later known as Rifa’iyyah Order. Rapa’i dabôh was firstly used as media of dakwah in spreading the Islamic teaching in the midst of the Acehnese society and later becomes an art that is still preserved until today. The spread of rapa’i dabôh was carried by the preachers of Islam from north-eastern to the south south-western regions and later developed into the rapa’i groups like Rincong Pusaka at Ie Lhob village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest and Putra Naga group at Mutiara village in Sawang sub-district in South Aceh.

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