

THE HISTORY OF RAPA'I DABÔH IN ACEH

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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'iyah. *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

Abstrak: *Rapa'i dabôh* merupakan kesenian tradisional yang dimainkan oleh 12 orang disertai atraksi berisiko menggunakan benda tajam yaitu pisau, pedang, gergaji mesin, rantai, bamboo runcing dan lain lain. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui sejarah *rapa'i dabôh* di Aceh. Instrumen yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah observasi, wawancara dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisa data yang digunakan adalah reduksi data, display data dan verifikasi data/kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjuk bahwa sejarah *rapa'i dabôh* di Aceh berasal dari seorang ulama terkemuka bernama Syekh Abdul Qadir Jailani yang diwariskan oleh Syekh Rafa'i yang kemudian lebih populer dikenal sebagai Tarekat Rifa'iyah. *Rapa'i dabôh* pada awalnya digunakan sebagai media dakwah, tetapi kemudian berkembang menjadi seni yang disukai oleh sebagian besar masyarakat Aceh. Penyebaran *rapa'i dabôh* dilakukan oleh para da'i dari bagian timur hingga barat daya-selatan Aceh, kemudian menginspirasi banyak kelompok pertunjukan seperti Rencong Pusaka di Desa Ie Lhop, Kecamatan Tangan-Tangan, Aceh Barat Daya dan Putra Naga di Desa Mutiara, Kecamatan Sawang, Aceh Selatan. Kedua kelompok tersebut masih eksis hingga saat ini.

Kata Kunci: sejarah; *rapa'i dabô*; 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.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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)

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.

²Essi Hermaliza, *et al*, *Revitalisasi Seni Yang Punah di Provinsi Aceh*, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Direktorat Kesenian: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Aceh, 2017, 150.

³Imam Juaini, *Tari Saman di Aceh (Kajian Historis dan Filosofis)*, "(Program Pascasarjana IAIN Ar-Raniry Darussalam Banda Aceh, unpublished MA thesis, 2013), 3-5.

who led one big *tarekat muktabar* called *Tarekat Qadiriyyah*. 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.⁴ 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 thigh, 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*.⁵ 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

⁴Suhelmi *et al*, *Apresiasi Seni Budaya Aceh*, (Ar-Raniry Press, Gedung Rektorat IAIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Darussalam Aceh Province, Cet, I, 2004), 61-62.

⁵Heru Yulianda Miraza, "Eksistensi Rapa'i Dabôh Dalam Nilai-Nilai Budaya Lokal di Gampong Batu Hitam Kecamatan Tapaktuan Aceh Selatan", (Prodi Sosiologi, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Komunikasi, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Darussalam Banda Aceh, unpublished BA, 2017), 50-55.

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.⁶ From the explanation above, it seems to be interestingly worth it to restudy the history of *rapa'i dabôh* 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.⁷ 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.⁸ *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*.⁹ 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.

⁶Enda Risna, Nilai-Nilai Sosial Dalam Rapa'i Debus di Kecamatan Simeulue Barat, (Prodi PPKN, Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Darusslam Banda Aceh, unpublished BA thesis, 2018), 40-41.

⁷Irwansyah, "The Form and Role of Music in Debus Performances in Aceh", unpublished BA Thesis, Medan State University, 2011.

⁸Interview with Tamrin, an artist/activist of traditional arts in Southwest Aceh in August, 2021.

⁹Maulia 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 *mauled* 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.¹² There was also

¹⁰Interview with Hasanul, a *rapa'i dabôh* member of Rincong Pusaka in Southwest Aceh, August 2021.

¹¹<http://document/dzxmjxnryr-sejarah-rapai-di-aceh.html>. 2021.

¹²The 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.¹³ 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 inspire 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 syekh” (12 syekh) those are *ulama* who were sent by Turkey Utsmani empire to spread the Islamic teaching in Southeast Asian areas, especially in Aceh. The twelve Syekh was led by Syekh Abdul Kadir Al-Jailani, Syekh Ibnu Mulkham, Syekh Muhammad Amin, Syekh Balul Kia, Syekh Ibnu Affan, Syekh

¹³Maulia Miranti, “Tari Rapa'i Daboh di Sanggar Garuda Mas Desa Sungai Pauh Kota Langsa”. *Jurnal Online*, Universitas Negeri Medan, 2013.

Jalaluddin, Syeikh Ibnu Kasem, Syeikh Nuruddin, Syeikh Samion, Syeikh Ibnu Anwar, Syeikh Bukhari and Syeikh Hasanuddin.¹⁴ Those *ulama* were spread in whole Aceh with the mission to spread the Islamic teaching through *tasawuf* approaches. To expedite the preaching his *dakwah*, the use of *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 *rapa'i*. The main purpose of the show is to invite people's curiosity who eventually to the desire of knowing Islamic teaching through *rapa'i dabôh*.¹⁵

In the history of the spread of Islamic teaching in Aceh, *ulama* do their *dakwah*, one of them through the art delivered through the value of monotheism (*tauhid*), *ma'rifat* and others. Therefore, the procession of *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 *dabôh* that they should not be *riya'* or arrogant, because it can harm themselves. During Dutch colonialization, *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, *rapa'i dabôh* is played in the middle of society, but in different nuance. However, the presence of the *rapa'i* still remains the same as the media to spread the Islamic teaching through art that is shown in certain events.¹⁶

In today's generation, *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 *rapa'i dabôh* was often competed by inviting many groups of *rapa'i* from many areas, especially in Southwest Aceh and South Aceh. The ancestor used to benefit this invulnerability (*ilmu kebal*) to fight against Dutch, that they were fearless from the disbeliever (*orang kafir*), even though they sacrificed their lives to defend the country

¹⁴Interview with Ampon Ubit, a *khalifah rapa'i dabôh* Rincong Pusaka, Ie Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest Aceh, 16 August 2021.

¹⁵Teuku Dadek, *Bunga Rampai: Seni dan Budaya*, (Banda Aceh: Pena, 2017). 11.

¹⁶Interview with Abdurrahman, the companion of *syekh* of *rapa'i dabôh* Rincong Pusaka in Ie Lhop village, Tangan-Tangan sub-district, Southwest Aceh, 16 August 2021.

and religion.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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 Ie 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.¹⁹

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, Syekh Yong.²⁰ Meanwhile, the *rapa'i* group of Putra Naga from Mutiara village, Sawang, South Aceh

¹⁷Interview with Kasem, an art history observer in South Aceh, August 2021.

¹⁸Beni 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.

¹⁹Interview with Zainal Abidin, a syekh/khalifah of Putra Naga group, Mutiara village, Sawang, South Aceh, August 2021.

²⁰Interview 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.²¹ 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'iyah* 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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