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# THE REBANA KERCING OF KAMPUNG LAUT, KELANTAN: A Case Study of a Cultural Community Project to School Pupils

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## **Abstract**

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*The Rebana Kercing, one of the traditional performances which, is declining in popularity among Kelantanese people. In its heyday, there used to be hundreds of groups performing the Rebana Kercing. To date, the number has declined leaving only 3 groups performing Rebana kercing in the whole state of Kelantan.*

*Realising the dying of Rebana Kercing, The Department of Culture and Arts together with the Rebana Kercing Club of Kampung Laut has successfully implemented the project Kelab Budaya Rakyat. This project is a community service offered by the Rebana Kercing Club which is headed by Encik Harun, the main Rebana Kercing activist in Kelantan, to school pupils of three schools in Kampung Laut, namely Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut, Sekolah Kebangsaan Seri Kampung Laut and Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut. As of now, the activity has flourished in Kampung Laut and considered as the star of arts product of Kampung laut.*

*This paper will discuss on how arts are revived through the offering of community service to the younger generation by the arts activists. This paper will also discuss the concerted effort done by the Rebana Kercing Club in making voluntary work profitable and worth venturing into despite the declining popularity of the art. This paper is a live case that has borne fruits in its endeavour to sustain heritage as part of our society.*

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## **Introduction**

Many traditional performances in Malaysia are currently facing a turbulent time where most of them are about to die off. The endless list of factors related to this phenomenon such as less receptiveness of those arts among younger generations, the declining number of activists involved, the unattractive performance, the influence of modern arts and many more are always cited as the cause of its fall.

Rebana Kercing is no exception in this issue. Rebana kercing in its heyday (in the 60's and 70's) received overwhelming support from the society. It was performed in all kinds of official and cultural functions especially wedding ceremony. The villagers flock to witness every single performance brought to them by the local authority or any individuals. Recently, the waves of dying arts hit the rebana kercing. Rebana kercing is almost alien to its place of birth. Only the old generation or the activists knew what rebana kercing is and they still continue to perform its legacy. Many scholars have pointed that certain factors such as aging activists, less attractive play, influences of modern arts and the ruling regulations were factors contributing to the current worsening situations of traditional performances

Understanding the ill fated destination, the activists of Kampung Laut came together, attempting to find ways to revive the dying arts. Recently, their role in the society is revived and

even strengthened by the society-based programme initiated by the activists of Rebana Kercing. The so called owner of the rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut, Pak Harun mentioned that his determination has now borne fruits when hundreds of pupils have acquired the skills of performing Rebana Kercing.

Their collective ideas were then realized in a concerted effort of voluntarily teaching school pupils of Kampung laut the skills of performing the century old tradition of Rebana Kercing. Three schools were adopted as their future actors to continue staging the precious heritage of Kampung Laut.

The precious experiences of the activists of Kampung Laut Rebana Kercing Association in preserving and conserving the dying Rebana Kercing to its current state is the main focus in this paper. Their courage, perseverance and undying efforts in contributing to the society have placed the Rebana Kercing to its respectable position in the society.

The case of dying arts is rampant in South-east Asia especially in Malaysia. Malaysia being in transition towards becoming an industrial country has sacrificed its own cultural treasures. Many of its precious cultural gems are facing a declining stage in its existence. Younger generations are less sensitive towards traditional arts and hence leaving them deaf and blind to arts. Many Malaysians worship the western culture, frequently witnessing the so called up market cultural shows such as musical

concerts, orchestra, opera and the like.

Traditional performances on the other hand are losing their activists everyday due to old age. Many of them are ill and with no fixed incomes to survive had caused them to refuse their continual involvement in the once upon a time a glamourous job that they were proud of.

### Review of opinions on the dying arts

Milene Salvini (1971) in her article 'Performing Arts in Indonesia', pointed out that the Kebyar dance of Southern Bali was dying off due to the lack of activists. Made Bandem (1981) also mentioned that performing arts is an important component of Indonesian culture and life.

An article by Indra Tranggono on Gairah Asmara Tobong (August, 1997) also indicated that the Kumpulan Tobong Ketoprak from the Kabupaten Klaten Jawa Tengah was dying off due to the declining response from the viewers. Similar problem occurred in Padang Indonesia. The Randai dance of the Minang people is dying off (Thursday, 15th February 2009, 6.30 p.m, TVRI SUMBAR, Budaya programme).

Rahmah Bujang (1998) in her article on classical dance of Khmer mentioned that the dance was about to die during the reign of Khmer Rouge regime (in the 70's) but was revived after the country obtained independence.

Rosnah Noh (1990) wrote in her thesis entitled 'Pengaruh dan Perkembangan Mak Yong Masa Kini Satu Tinjauan' that the dying of Makyong is due to lack of permanent players.

Similar situation happened in Malaysia where by Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin (1994) relates the dying of Malay performing arts to the small number of activists as well as political intervention by the state administration. In 1990, the PAS led administration of Kelantan pronounced that any forms of performing arts which are not in line with the Islamic teaching were banned from performing in public (Berita Harian, Februari 1997). On the other hand, Siti Zainon Ismail (1985) mentioned in her book 'Getaran Jalur dan Warna' that many of the Kelantanese themselves do not appreciate the Makyong, hence making it less frequently performed. She says:

"many graduates from Kelantan itself cannot appreciate 'Makyong' because of the fact that it is less frequently performed and starting to die-off from the public"

Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin (Berita Harian, 25 Julai 1998) agreed that the banning of Dikir Barat in Kelantan was due to the usage of obscene words used in the scripts. However Zaiton Nasir in her article entitled 'Mempertahankan Tradisi Mak Yong' (Dewan Budaya: Mac 1991) observed that Makyong has its future to be disseminated to the masses. Ghulam Sarwar (1986) supported the prediction made on the dying of Makyong by pointing out that the main reason for the worsening situation is the inexistence of the players. The players are aging, leaving only 12 players who really know 'Makyong'.

No specific quotation on the dying of Rebana Kercing was cited by scholars of traditional performing arts since it has become alien and very much less known to most Kelantanese in the 80's and 90's. In fact its popularity is only confined to a specific area that is Kampung Laut and its neighbourhood.

Based on the literature presented above, it is very obvious that most of the traditional performances in Kelantan are dying off and in view of these situations the researcher has started a journey to unfold the reviving mystery of Rebana Kercing. At this point, the writer can conclude that factors contributing to the dying of most traditional performances are as follows:

- a. Aging activists
- b. Declining number of activists
- c. Less number of viewers
- d. Younger generations are not interested in viewing traditional performances and not willing to pay for viewing.
- e. Legal enforcement by the Kelantan State Government
- f. Unattractive performances and costumes
- g. Less support from the government authorities and corporate companies in giving subsidies and sponsorship

## The Rebana Kercing Association of Kampung Laut

The Rebana Kercing Association of Kampung Laut is a non governmental organization established by the kampung folk to ensure the continuity of their precious traditional culture which can be regarded as an effort of preserving the dying arts. It was initiated by the guru of Rebana Kercing that is Encik Harun Hassan who inherits the skill of performing Rebana Kercing dance from his late father. His late father who was once the expert of Rebana Kercing in Kampung Laut has left Harun with all the precious skills to perform Rebana Kercing. He is the only person bestowed by his late father the skills to treasure and continue the legacy of the endangered cultural commodity. The community of Kampung Laut has performed the Rebana Kercing for ages and they master the skill and trade of performing Rebana Kercing. Through the Association, the group has performed not just in Malaysia but also to the neighbouring countries. Their performances received overwhelming support from the viewers, so much so that they are able to accumulate enough yearly income that enable them to organize a trip to Medan, Indonesia as an incentive as well as a token of appreciation to the group members for their undying support.

In Kelantan, Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut is the only remaining group that is actively involved in many cultural functions organized by the Department of Culture, Arts and Heritage

Kelantan. The organization of the association is headed by the Chairman, a teacher by profession, Cikgu Wan Azmi Mohd Nor, Deputy Chairman, Assistant Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. Encik Harun is the appointed as the Advisor cum Principal Trainer for the group.

Students from the neighbouring schools especially Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut are the main feeder for the trainee of Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut because of its close vicinity with the school as well as being the locals who reside around the training centre. The training centre is just an old semi brick building owned by the Youth Club of Kampung Laut. The association was given the permission to use the first floor of the building for administration, operation and training purposes whereas the ground floor houses a kampung restaurant.

Training schedule is planned according to the students' school schedules. Earlier parts of the year that is from January till July, the frequency of training done is three to four times a week starting Monday to Thursday. However, as most important school examinations are expected to be held at the end of the year starting August till December, the training schedules were then changed to twice a week, on Thursday and Saturday. Both days are considered as end of the week day and weekend whereby most students are free to come for practice on those days. Normally, training lasts for 2 hours from 5.00 p.m to 7.00 p.m. This

training activity was initially organized under the “Tunas Budaya” programme run by the Department of Culture and Arts, Kelantan branch with an aim to preserve the dying arts. It is now fully organized by the Rebana Kercing Kampung laut as the Ministry programme was dissolved. The endless support and strong effort put forward by the lovers and activists of this form of arts has made Rebana Kercing stay in Kelantan and continue to serve the need of the community through his humble yet substantial descendant programme.

### Objectives of the community project

The main objective of the Rebana Kercing is to preserve and conserve the Rebana Kercing of Kampung Laut from dying off. Specifically the objectives of this project are as follows:

- a. To disseminate information on Rebana Kercing to the younger generation
- b. To inculcate appreciation among younger generation towards Rebana Kercing, hence motivating them to learn and acquire the skill of performing it.
- c. To train the younger generation to play Rebana Kercing so that they will acquire the skill of performing Rebana Kercing.
- d. To make them realise the precious value of preserving Rebana Kercing that will form parts of Kampung Laut society identity
- e. To innovate and improvise the Rebana Kercing performances of Kampung Laut
- f. To strengthen the ever magical expression of JatiDiri



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### The Rebana Kercing

The Rebana Kercing is a form of traditional performing arts that stresses on music, singing and dancing. No acting is involved in Rebana Kercing. The Rebana Kercing is normally performed by 10 to 30 dancers, (sometimes the number of dancers can be up to 40 performers) supported by 10 Rebana music players. The Rebana players will stand in a line at the back of the dancers. The movements and steps of the dancer is according to the tempo of the Rebana, dancing in a step of 4, moving forward and backward. Every dancer will have his/her partner. Normally 5 couples of dancers (10 dancers) are lined up in one line, hence making three lines if there are 30 dancers. Dancers are coupled with their own gender, so as to avoid the act of touching among boys and girls which is prohibited in the teaching of Islam. It is only performed by both girls and boys below the age of 12 years old because above 12 years of age, they are considered as Akhil Baligh or have reached the age of puberty which is not permitted in Islam to visually expose their physical feature to the public, let alone dancing on stage, especially girls.

While dancing, the dancers will harmoniously chant some verses or lyrics in Malay and Arabic, depicting religious principles and at some point praising Allah, Prophet Muhamad and his comrades for all the good deeds that they have rendered to the welfare of Islam and the world. All the lyrics are originally from Hadratul Maut in Yemen, brought by the Muslim priests (dakwah) cum traders. According to Harun, the trainer of Rebana Kercing, the lyrics are as old as 300 years and it has not changed since then. The main lyrics are traditionally passed down from one generation to the other orally without proper documentation. As a consequence, many of the lyrics has been lost due to the lack of proper documentation. The writer tried hard to understand the lyric but to no avail, could not easily comprehend it, only sometimes the writer could catch them saying out repeatedly the name of Allah, his beloved Prophet Muhamad and the Prophet's comrades.

The rebana Kercing is a small tamborine-like instrument which when hit will echo out a mixture of kompong and tamborine-like sound with no strings kind of musical instrument used. The physical look of the Rebana Kercing is almost like a kompong but the size is slightly bigger with a few metal chips attached at the edge of the Rebana that will produce the clinging sounds of hitting metal. The hitting of the Rebana resembles a mixture of West Coast Kompong and Trengganu's Rodat. The Melody sometimes can be in low and high pitch alternately.

The Rebana Kercing performances have never been associated with ritual acts but more towards Islamic Tasawuf teaching. It combines entertainment and religious elements in one show. The main guru is Encik Harun Hassan, assisted by his own son Encik Hazlami Harun, who is currently a Diploma in Dance student of the Akademi Seni Warisan Negara.

The structure of the show is very simple which comprises of the opening introduction of the music, the dance, and the closing.

The opening introduction of music is followed by the dance and the dancers are arranged according to the pattern that they want to form while dancing. Normally the number of dancers of the same gender consists of 10 children per row that are arranged in a straight line.

The body movements of dance are of foot and hands, moving from one point to the other, in a forward and backward manner. The dance on the other hand involves more foot movement and less hand movement. It starts with a slow movement gradually picking up to a faster dynamic beat and steps. The movements are not soft and fine, tapping one side of the leg to the other with a small jump. The dance involves minimal head movement and eye contact. The writer observed that the dance has no proper sign of ending which ends up abruptly. Hence, one has to really listen and follow through to the rhythm of the music to enable him to detect the ending of the dance.

The costume worn during the performances is slightly influenced by the Arab and Chinese culture. A pair of blouse and pant made of shiny Satin material and shocking colours are worn by the dancers to perform. In addition to the main costume, accessories are also worn as part of the decoration so as to make it more presentable. The dancers wear the front lapel (Pemekop) with two strings attached to it, tying the lapel to the front part of the blouse of the dancers. One of the strings is tied at the hip and another to the neck. The motif of design of the Pemekop is either dragon or flowers with butterflies, sewn heavily with beads originally from the Middle-eastern countries. Surprisingly, the writer found a little contradiction to the teaching of Islam where the use of animal such as dragon and butterfly as clothing motif is prohibited in Islam yet a performance which is more towards tasawuf teaching goes beyond the boundaries of Islamic Principles. There are logical reasons to the use of those motifs, as explained by Pak Harun: Traces of reasons go way back to the history of Kampung Laut. Kampung Laut was once a trading port where many traders from the Middle East and China met for business transaction and Islam was the main religion brought by the Arab Traders to be disseminated among the traders. To please and attract the attention of those Chinese traders to Islam, the Dragon and Butterfly motifs were used in designing costumes for the dancers. This act has triggered the wide assimilation of Chinese, Arabic and Malay

cultures in Kampung Laut, hence directly influencing the design of costume that combines both floral and fauna designs together in the performance of Rebana Kercing.

Another feature of the Rebana Kercing's costume is the use of dangling strings of beads as a decorative item which is similar to the "la" worn in makyong performance tied to the back of the shoulder of the performers. It is tied to the neck and no difference in terms of design is observed between boys and girls. Girls conform to the Muslim attire by not revealing their aurah (parts of the body which is sinful to be exposed and seen by males) by wearing a scarf. The costumes are also designed so as to follow the Muslim Code of Attire where loose long sleeve plain striking colored blouse with no decorative patterns and pants are worn to avoid any misinterpretation by audience.

### **The Modus Operandi**

One may have wondered as to how the programme has started. The programme started as a government project in line with the aim to preserve and conserve the dying traditional arts. It was supervised and given fund by the then Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. However, somehow and somewhere along the line of implementing the programme, (most probably due to some administrative problems), it was finally discontinued and dissolved. The association saw the needs to take up this programme as a community project and

decided to continue the legacy of training Rebana Kercing. Since then, the association has not failed to deliver his promise to the country in inculcating cultural appreciation among the young generation through training. Batches after batches of primary school students in the neighbouring kampungs were trained to dance and perform the Rebana Kercing.

Trainees for this programme are school students, selected from the neighbouring schools that are Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut, Sekolah Kebangsaan Sri Kampung Laut and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut. At any point of time, the maximum number of trainees of Rebana Kercing is limited to 50 students. Students are not given any monetary rewards and it is up to their will to continue learning the skills. However, only students from the age of 7 till 13 years old are selected to join the programme. A 13- year old is considered the age limit to join this programme because 13 is the age where students reach their puberty period. After the students have reached puberty, they are not allowed to perform anymore due to prohibitions mentioned in Islamic teaching. Training is done regularly ranging from 2 to 5 times a week, depending on the situation, starting Monday from 5 p.m. till 7.00 p.m. Up to the time of this research he has trained hundreds of students to learn Rebana Kercing.

The existence of Rebana Kercing in Kampung Laut is mainly due to the hard work and undying

love of Encik Harun towards the art. His effort of uniting all lovers of Rebana Kercing has ensured that Rebana Kercing lives continually in its place of origin, Kampung Laut. Being an experienced art activist, his approach to training youngsters in arts is simple and less frill as uttered by him:

“ Sene sajo, hok mano kita ado kita buatlah dulu, jange nak tunggu banyak pitih baru boleh buat, hok mano kita pandai dan boleh ajar, kita cuba dulu, tak payah tempat comel atau beradung, boleh buat dulu....kalu ore tengok berjaya, barulah ore buka mata...setakat ni Alhamdulillah doh la...Nampak-nampak macam boleh gi dah tu.....ambo nak tengok Rebana Kercing ni hidup”

(literary it means; “ it is something easy... anything that we can proceed, we do it first... we do not have to wait to have enough money or fund to start doing something...what we are expert in and able to teach, why not try it first... we do not need a good and comfortable place to start implementing our project....when others witness our success, then it will be an eye opener for them....as of now, alhamdullilah it looks ok....it can go far...I want to see Rebana Kercing survives”)

The modus operandi for this revival project is a simple one layer training but effective. The dissemination of knowledge and skill is passed from one cohort to another cohort hoping that they later in their life, they will be the patrons and caretakers of Rebana Kercing. It started with the activist, Encik Harun who started the project in

a micro scale, followed by the intervention of the government related agency under the programme of Tunas Budaya. The programme was made possible through the involvement of the Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut Association with Encik Harun acting as the Advisor cum Principal Trainer. School pupils from the neighborhood were chosen to join the programme and after 12 to 13 years old, they exit from the programme and let new participants

to join the programme. These two processes are shown in the diagram as Exit and Entrance where the process will continue recruiting and graduating students over and over again as a continuous cycle. By doing this, the association has continued to train, encourage, disseminate and revive the dying arts by imparting skill and knowledge of performing Rebana Kercing to the younger generation from time to time. In short, the modus operandi can be illustrated in Diagram 1.0 below:

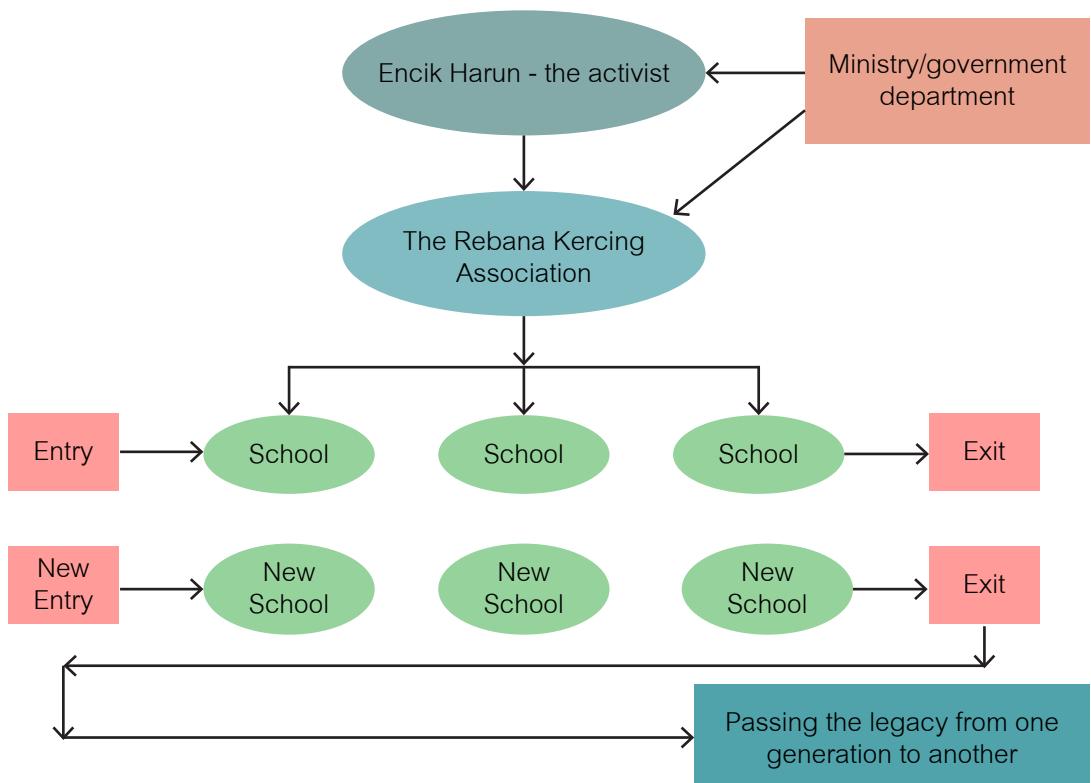


Diagram 1.0: Modus Operandi of Community Project of Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut



## Conclusion

Rebana Kercing is one form of traditional performances which combines dancing, singing and music. It was once popular in Kelantan as a form of entertainment but nowadays it is one of the dying arts on the verge of extinction in the arts landscape of Kelantan. Only a few groups were left from hundreds of groups existed in the sixties.

Rebana Kercing is now revived by a simple approach taken by the activist of Rebana Kercing, Encik Harun Hassan. The strong willed advisor cum principal trainer as well as the main 'guru' of Rebana Kercing started his journey of saving the dying art by initiating a humble class of Rebana Kercing with school pupils in his neighbourhood. Encik Harun with all his heart and soul has devoted his life in Rebana Kercing. He has weathered all the nasty comments posed to him and spent his entire life in propagating the teaching of playing Rebana Kercing.

The passion, love and endless support by the activist towards this art has proven to be fruitful. Currently, Rebana Kercing is steadily moving fast and being performed in all state level functions as well as national and international. Income was generated to sustain its existence in the traditional performance industry.

Association formed by the Rebana Kercing has also helped them survive through turbulent times and continue the legacy of Rebana Kercing. The tactful running of the association has encouraged the members to stay loyal to the association (of the Kampung Laut Rebana Kercing Association, 16040 Palekbang, Kelantan) and they were asked to start classes teaching the nearby Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut pupils on Rebana Kercing performance. ●

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