

Dikir Barat: More than a dynamic chorus

by Stephanie Ho, written on 20 February 2014

Dikir Barat is a form of Malay choral singing popular in Singapore and Malaysia. With a flexible format that incorporates singing, poetry, movement and music, Dikir Barat is a popular entertainment for both rural people and urbanites, young and old.

Dikir Barat is a form of Malay choral singing popular in Singapore and Malaysia. In rural areas, the *Dikir Barat* was usually performed during the harvest season, weddings or on festive occasions. Groups from different villages and towns also sparred with each other in *Dikir Barat* competitions.

Today, *Dikir Barat* has spread to the cities and performances can be seen in urban areas and on television.¹ In addition, *Dikir Barat* is no longer just entertainment, it is now used to educate and advise listeners on current issues of the day.²

Origins

Dikir Barat is believed to have originated from the Malay villages in southern Thailand. The word *barat* literally means “the west”. Some researchers argue that *barat* refers to the country of Thailand that is situated to the west of Kelantan where the term *Dikir Barat* originated. In Thailand, this musical genre is known as *Dikir Karut* because of the presence of the *tukang karut*. The word *dikir* is believed to have been derived from *zikir*, a form of religious singing and chanting. The *Dikir Barat* is, however, secular entertainment.³

From southern Thailand, *Dikir Barat* was said to have then spread to Kelantan, Malaysia where it was localised. This came in various ways such as the incorporation of the *pantun* and the Kelatanese dialect into the musical form. From Kelantan, *Dikir Barat* spread to other parts of Malaysia and Singapore.⁴

The group

A *Dikir Barat* group comprises four main elements: the *tok juara* (leader), *tukang karut* (song initiator), a chorus of about 10 to 15 performers known as the *awok-awok* and a percussion ensemble. The *tok juara* sets the theme of the performance and keeps the group together during the performance.⁵ Themes span a wide range of topics that include love, marriage and life in the village or city.

The *tukang karut* initiates responses and challenges competing groups. This is important in places such as Kelantan where *Dikir Barat* is very much a battle of wits.

¹ Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, p. 356.

² Song of advice and sketch. (1989, March 2). *The Straits Times*, p. 6.

³ Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, p. 355.

⁴ Sharifah Masturah Bte Syed Osman. (1998/1999). *Dikir Barat in Kelantan and Singapore: Looking beyond its superficiality*. BA (Hons) Thesis. National University of Singapore, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, pp. 9-10.

⁵ Peters, J. (2003). Sonic orders in the sonic environment of Singapore. In J. Peters et al (Eds.) *Sonic orders in ASEAN musics : a field and laboratory study of musical cultures and systems in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ASEAN COCI, p. 386.

While competing, teams have to weave “a continuous stream of impromptu, rhythmic verses” to ridicule and pin down their opponent. This is less so in Singapore, where competing teams perform separately and do not have the opportunity to engage in verbal battle.⁶ Nevertheless, the *tukang karut* has to be quick-witted as he has to spontaneously compose four-line poems known as *pantuns* either to rebut his competitor or based on the theme introduced by the *tok juara*.⁷

The *awok-awok* provides excitement through body movements, hand-clapping and singing to reinforce phases sung by the *tok juara* or *tukang karut*.^{8,9} The percussion ensemble that supports a *Dikir Barat* group varies in size. A typical ensemble consists of two *rebana* – hand-held drums – of different size, a pair of maracas and several gongs.¹⁰

In a typical performance, the *tok juara* starts by introducing the theme through a lyrical song. He usually sings without accompaniment and in a slow tempo. He is followed by the *tukang karut* who stands and moves around while singing and improvising lyrics. The *awok-awok* responds to the *tok juara* and *tukang karut* with singing as well as rhythmic and synchronised movements of the arms, hands and upper torso.^{11 12}

***Dikir Barat* in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, *Dikir Barat* is popular in many areas especially Kelantan where it is regarded as a traditional art form. Besides performances, *Dikir Barat* recordings are also popular.¹³ The *New Sunday Times* reported that in 2006 there were about five major production houses in Kelantan releasing around 20 *Dikir Barat* albums a year.¹⁴

In 1998, a controversy arose from the Kelantan government’s decision to ban *Dikir Barat* performances. The government claimed that a number of *Dikir Barat* organisers included other forms of entertainment that contradicted with Islamic teachings.¹⁵ The ban was short-lived with the government allowing performances as long as groups agreed to abide by several conditions. Performances were only allowed by *Dikir Barat* groups affiliated to the State *Dikir Barat* Association, and female *Dikir Barat*

⁶ Sharifah Masturah Bte Syed Osman. (1998/1999). *Dikir Barat in Kelantan and Singapore: Looking beyond its superficiality*. BA (Hons) Thesis. National University of Singapore, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, p. 11.

⁷ Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, p. 357.

⁸ Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, p. 356.

⁹ Peters, J. (2003). Sonic orders in the sonic environment of Singapore. In J. Peters et al (Eds.) *Sonic orders in ASEAN musics : a field and laboratory study of musical cultures and systems in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ASEAN COCI, p. 386.

¹⁰ Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, p. 358.

¹¹ Sharifah Masturah Bte Syed Osman. (1998/1999). *Dikir Barat in Kelantan and Singapore: Looking beyond its superficiality*. BA (Hons) Thesis. National University of Singapore, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, pp. 12-16.

¹² Matusky, P. and Tan, S. B. (2004). *The music of Malaysia: The classical, folk and syncretic traditions*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, pp. 356-357.

¹³ Brennan, C. (2001). Religion, cultural identity and Kelantan’s *Dikir Barat*. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 12, No. 3.

¹⁴ *Dikir Barat* rocks ok! (2006, October 1). *New Sunday Times*.

¹⁵ Zainal Alam Kadir. (1998, June 2). A slow death for *dikir barat*? *The New Straits Times*.

singers, comedian artistes and other forms of entertainment were strictly prohibited during such performances.¹⁶ *Dikir Barat* performances in other Malaysian states were not subject to such rules.

In recent years, the Malaysian government has begun to use *Dikir Barat* to instill patriotism in its people. Information Minister Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin said, “Besides being entertained, we can educate the people, especially the younger set, on our nation's rich and colourful history...*Dikir Barat* performers can convey these messages to the audience to instill love and affection for our blessed country.”¹⁷ *Dikir Barat* performances are now included in national festive celebrations.¹⁸

***Dikir Barat* in Singapore**

Dikir Barat became popular in Singapore during the 1980s. In 1984, the Malay Literary, Debating and Cultural Society of Nanyang Junior College organised the first *Dikir Barat* competition for schools. This competition sparked off interest among secondary schools and junior colleges which began to form groups for the competition.¹⁹

Dikir Barat soon became popular among the youth. Breaking from the tradition that *Dikir Barat* was to be performed only by men or boys, girls in Singapore also began to join or form their own *Dikir Barat* groups. Even as these young groups were learning a traditional musical genre, they also began to modify *Dikir Barat* to suit them. For example, groups used their creativity to introduce new movements into their performances rather than stick to the traditional moves.²⁰

By the 1990s, *Dikir Barat* had become so popular that groups even began recording their songs. The album *Dikir Nusantara* released by two top *Dikir Barat* groups was so successful that it sold out within a month of its release.²¹ More competitions such as the nation-wide competition organised by Majlis Pusat and the People's Association in 1993 helped to further promote the musical genre.²² That same year the Singapore *Dikir Barat* Federation was organized. Its aim was to promote the art form, streamline and coordinate *Dikir Barat* activities and provide guidance and resources for *Dikir Barat* groups.²³

Quote

“...each member (of a Dikir Barat group) is like a part of the human body. For the body to function well, each part has to serve well. The combination of ideas, the

¹⁶ Nik Imran Abdullah. (1998, July 9). Kelantan lifts ban on dikir barat shows. *The New Straits Times*.

¹⁷ The Information Ministry will use “dikir barat” as a ... (2007, July 22). *Bernama Daily Malaysia News*.

¹⁸ Colourful way to attract more tourists (2010, May 16). *New Sunday Times*

¹⁹ Radin Zahara Osman. (1985, October 29). A bigger following for ‘Dikir Barat’. *The Straits Times*.

²⁰ Community zinging. (1989, August 9). *The Straits Times*, p. 3.

²¹ Yaakub Rashid. (1991, May 15). Songs for the common folk. *The Straits Times*.

²² Tuminah Sapawi. (1992, December 17). Contest of music and wit. *The Straits Times*.

²³ Tuminah Sapawai. (1993, February 10). Choral advice. *The Straits Times*.

cooperation and enthusiasm among the performers are crucial for a successful Dikir Barat performance."²⁴

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²⁴ Quoted in Sharifah Masturah Bte Syed Osman. (1998/1999). *Dikir Barat in Kelantan and Singapore: Looking beyond its superficiality*. BA (Hons) Thesis. National University of Singapore, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, p. 12.