

Abdul Muluk of Muarajambi Village: Awaited by Many, Preserved by a Few

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Abstract. Abdul Muluk is a theatrical art inherited from ancestors and a source of pride for the people of Muarajambi Village. Its unique characteristics are etched in memory. After passing through its golden age, Abdul Muluk began to be abandoned by his fans. Popular entertainment has turned to modern forms of art in line with social, political, and technological industry changes. This research aims to explore the glory and dynamics of Abdul Muluk as a traditional theater entity in Jambi Province. The research uses ethnographic work steps with a narrative approach. Data sources were obtained from informants; players, observers, artists, and audiences of Abdul Muluk. The findings show that the structure of Abdul Muluk's performance consists of an opening, core, and closing section. His performances are always eagerly awaited by the community. Its existence had once disappeared, then was revived. The heirs reconstructed by re-documenting the stories, scenes, and elements of the performance. Sanggar Seni Sereh Serumpun was established to preserve collective memory.

Keywords: traditional theater, abdul muluk, muarajambi, collective memory, sereh serumpun

1 Introduction

Abdul Muluk has not yet attracted much attention from researchers. Information on its distribution and development is still very limited. The Encyclopedia of Indonesian Music Series A-E informs that Abdul Muluk is a Jambi folk art in the form of theater. Abdul Muluk is found in Berembang Village, Sekernan District, Muaro Jambi Regency. During that period, Abdul Muluk, as a theater group, emerged in other villages. At least, there is one theater group in every village [1]. The spread of Abdul Muluk extends to Jambi Kecil, Jambi Tulo, Muarajambi, Dusun Lamo, Setiris, Desa Baru, Kemingking Luar, and Kumpe Ilir [2]. These two studies show that Abdul Muluk is popular and well-received by the community.

Entering the millennium era, the Abdul Muluk group can only be found in two villages, namely Semubuk and Muarajambi. A team of lecturers from the Indonesian Institute of Arts Padangpanjang once conducted a study on the performance structure of Abdul Muluk in Semubuk Village [3]. Abdul Muluk in Semubuk is estimated to have existed since pre-independence and is subsequently known as the Abdul Muluk Mekar Kembali Theater [4]. The existence of Abdul Muluk in Semubuk is in a critical condition. The same goes for Abdul Muluk in Muarajambi Village. Although he is relatively younger, Abdul Muluk from Muarajambi Village has also reached his twilight years [5]. Abdul Muluk only hopes for an invitation to perform.

The condition of traditional theaters in several regions is similarly faring. Mendu in West Kalimantan experiences ups and downs due to both internal and external issues [6]. Mamanda in South Kalimantan is facing the development of technology and culture [7]. Bapandung is not experiencing regeneration [8]. Randai gradually disappeared [9]. The existence of Onduo Rokan Hulu is being eroded by time [10].

Abdul Muluk as a cultural identity is worthy of study. As a form of cultural expression, Abdul Muluk contains identity, values, and life messages. Identity can be seen from the use of language, idioms, tone, and symbols that blend into dialogue, movement, and songs, as well as the accessories worn. Messages are conveyed through the stories presented, which are then internalized and become part of life. However, the history of its development also needs to be thoroughly examined. Studying history is not only to understand the past but also to reflect on the future. Traditional theater can be fully understood through the stages of historical tracing, dynamics, obstacles, and its forms [11].

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the key theory of collective memory pioneered by Halbwachs. Memory is a social product that continuously evolves and is maintained through social processes. There is a close relationship between individual memory and the reflection of cultural context; this is the essence of collective memory [12]. Collective memory is also understood as a reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present to view the future [13], [14]. Society will remember and forget things according to necessity [15]. The need to continuously remember or forget is the result of an individual's memory representation of safe or risky information [16]–[18]. Thus, memory becomes the foundation of attitudes in living life and behaving in society [19]. This framework is used to explore the dynamics of Abdul Muluk in Muarajambi Village.

The novelty of the research lies in the object, locus, and approach used. This research provides new insights into the development of traditional theater in Jambi. In addition, this research contributes to the cultural and tourism aspects considering the Cultural Heritage of Muarajambi Temple, which is the largest temple complex in Southeast Asia located in Muarajambi Village.

2 Research Method

This research uses an ethnographic method with a narrative approach. The research setting was conducted in Muarajambi Village, Muaro Jambi District, Jambi Province. This research explores the community's memory of Abdul Muluk as a cultural product that was once popular. The narrative approach makes the narrative a spoken and written text that contains information about an event [20]. The oral text is obtained through interviews with key informants, namely every individual who has played, watched, participated, and paid attention to Abdul Muluk. The focus of the questions is on experiences that have been lived and witnessed. Triangulation is carried out by comparing oral texts, documents, and images. The narrative was analyzed thematically to obtain the chronological sequence of the story [21]. The narrative approach is expected to optimally evoke strong memories of the dynamics of Abdul Muluk in Muarajambi Village.

3 Result And Discussion

3.1 The Description Abdul Muluk

The Abdul Muluk Theater tells the love story of Abdul Muluk and Siti Rapeah. The age of Sultan Abdul Hamisah is getting older, but his son, Abdul Muluk, is still not married. He was married to Siti Rapeah, the daughter of Tuan Jalal, the poorest citizen in the Kingdom of Barbari. After handing over the throne to Abdul Muluk, Sultan Abdul Hamisah passed away. In a somber atmosphere, Abdul Muluk sailed to the Land of Ben to soothe his heart. On the other hand, the Sultan of Hindustan was searching for a queen. The Sultan was captivated by the beauty of Siti Rapeah. A war broke out between the two kingdoms.

The performance begins with an opening by the narrator. The narrator may or may not be on stage. The opening content is the delivery of greetings to the audience.

nenek datuk, tuo-tuo tengganai, alim ulama, cerdas pandai
nenek datuk, tetua, alim ulama, terpelajar

nan kecil sakti, nan gedang betuah
kecil sakti, besar betuah

nan kecil idak kami sebut namonyo, nan gedang idak pulo kami imbau gelarnyo
kecil tidak disebut nama, besar tidak pula disebut gelarnya

mano nan bairing serto batintin
bagi yang berjalan maupun yang bertuntun

mano nan bagendong serto nan babedong
bagi yang menggendong (orang tua) maupun yang berbedong (bayi)

inilah persembahan kami, Abdul Muluk
inilah persembahan kami, Abdul Muluk

The actors enter the stage, circling the table in a clockwise direction. They walked while dancing in their own styles. Violin, double-sided drums, and gongs accompanied the actors' funny antics. No less than thirty people, all of them men. The opening scene of Abdul Muluk began to mesmerize the hundreds of audience present. The audience cheered and applauded. Occasionally shouting the name of the actor, who is none other than a friend and neighbor, father, and grandfather. The audience couldn't help but laugh seeing someone they knew appear in an unusual way. Some wore wigs. Some dressed in royal attire, complete with a tricorn hat, cloak, and matching pants. There are also those who resemble women's hairstyles.

banyaklahnyolah ladun
lah bekarolah ladun
ladunlahnyolah kami kasihlah kaulah dan sayang
lah jambi, muarolahnyo jambi
ladun lahnyolah kami kasihlah kaulah dan sayang
lah jambi, muarolahnyo jambi
banyaknyo lahnyo pantun
lah bekamolah pantun
pantun lahnyolah kami kasihlah kaulah dan sayang
hati di dalamlahnyo hati

*pantun lahnyolah kami kasih lah kau lah dan sayang
hati penghiburlahnyo hati*

The excerpt of the text above is a verse sung by the actors while they circle the table together. The people of Muarajambi Village call it Beladun, a song at the beginning of the performance that narrates the story being told or the tale that will be played. Dulmuluk from South Sumatra uses the term *bermas/beremas* as a greeting at the beginning and end [22]. In Mamanda, the term *ladon* is used, while in Mendu, the term *ladun* is used. The similarity in character and narrative is the reason these theaters are rooted in Malay [23].

After presenting the story to be played, the next scene in the opening act is the introduction of the characters. This part is called *Bekisah*. Each actor introduces themselves by stating their name and role in the story. The mention of names is done spontaneously by the actors. The actors will come up with strange names as humor. The humor in the performance is intended to entertain and elicit laughter from the audience [24].

First Harapan	:	Call me by my name, Macan Kurap , appointed by the king as the First Harapan.
Second Harapan	:	Call me by my name, Singo Edan , appointed by the king as the Second Harapan.
First Minister	:	Jay Jubang was appointed as the First Minister.
Second Minister	:	Gajah Galau was appointed as the Second Minister.
First Hulubalang	:	Bujang Sambal who is willing to become the First Hulubalang.
Second Hulubalang	:	Tumang was appointed as the Second Hulubalang.
Mamando	:	There is a name I have, Ali-Ali Pantat Belango , sent here, he went there to become Mamando in Negri Baribari.
Abdul Hamisah	:	Sedio Bagindo sits on the royal court throne, 44 kings adorned with gold, silk, diamonds, and emeralds fringed on the left and right, yet they bow and submit to me. It is I, Abdul Hamisah, who leads in the Kingdom of Berbari, lacking nothing at all.

The main part tells the story of Abdul Muluk's marriage to Siti Rapeah. Not long after getting married, Abdul Hamisah passed away. Abdul Muluk became the sultan, succeeding his father. In a state of deep sorrow, Abdul Muluk set sail to the Land of Ben. The voyage to the Land of Ben was also an order from the royal Astrologer. The Astrologer predicted a disaster would occur in the Land of Barbari. The Land of Barbari was consumed by fire. Abdul Muluk had to save himself. On the voyage to the Land of Ben, the Sultan of Hindustan, Bahaudinkan, desired the expansion of his kingdom. The Kingdom of Berbabri became the target of an attack by the Kingdom of Hindustan.

The final part tells the story of the war between the Barbari kingdom and Hindustan. Hope fought against Hope, the Minister fought against the Minister, the General fought against the General. Victory was achieved by Sultan Bahaudinkan. Abdul Muluk was captured. Sultan Bahaudinkan wants to marry Siti Rapeah. The show is over.

3.2 The Dynamics of Abdul Muluk

Talking about traditional theater is essentially talking about the history of theater. In a sociological context, traditional theater is inseparable from the values and way of life of the community, which are manifested as local wisdom. The community environment becomes a place for the creation of art. Whether realized or not, the community environment becomes an inexhaustible source of inspiration to be explored. Because of its development and creation within specific ethnic environments, traditional theater will exhibit diverse characteristics, resulting in the uniqueness of each traditional theater. One of those unique features is the use of language. Traditional theater generally uses regional languages. Therefore, traditional theater is also referred to as regional theater, indicating the origin of that traditional theater [25].

The dynamics of Abdul Muluk are inseparable from the grand narrative about the emergence of traditional theater. We believe there is a connection between Parsi Theater, Indra Bangsawan, Mamanda, Dulmuluk, and Abdul Muluk. Starting from the arrival of the Parsi Indian troupe in 1870 to the Malay Peninsula. Parsi is also called Bangsawan or Mendu [26]. In 1897, Bangsawan performed in Banjarmasin [23]. This troupe, led by Mr. Ibrahim, performed the Poem of Abdul Muluk [27]. Subsequently, it became better known as Mamanda [28]. In South Sumatra, Abdul Muluk in its performance form first staged in 1910 [29], while in Jambi, Abdul Muluk started performing in 1965 [4].

In the village of Muarajambi, Abdul Muluk has been known as a theatrical performance art since 1960. (Budiman, Interview: 9 November 2024). Abdul Muluk is highly popular among the community. At the wedding event, Abdul Muluk was invited to perform as the main entertainment. The performance was held in an open space using the yard of the house. The cloth is spread in a circular shape as a barrier between the players and the audience. Stage lighting only uses strongkeng or petromak. The shadows of the players and audience caused by the petromak create a magical aesthetic. The event supporters numbered no less than forty people. The training and performance processes are conducted in the evening. All of them are men. Society considers it taboo for women to engage in nighttime activities. Women are protected by strict customary laws [30].

The performance of Abdul Muluk can last all night long. In certain scenes, the audience joins in the circle of the performance. They sang and danced together. The story being performed is the love story of Abdul Muluk. Budiman, the actor of Abdul Muluk, mentioned that he once asked his parents about the origin of the Abdul Muluk story, but did not get a definite answer. However, we believe that the story of Abdul Muluk was indeed not in text form, but was obtained orally [31].

Abdul Muluk's popularity did not last long. Entering the 1980s, Abdul Muluk rarely received performance invitations. The shift in public entertainment preferences and the rapid development of the technology industry are partly to blame. Society is shifting its entertainment to more dynamic forms. Orchestras or solo organs have emerged as a new entertainment trend. From an economic perspective, orchestras or solo organs are considered cheaper and more practical than inviting Abdul Muluk. All this time, Abdul Muluk's group never set a fee, there was no payment, it was a communal effort within the framework of togetherness. However, times have changed. Abdul Muluk has been separated from society and has become a memory for those who once witnessed it.

Realizing the cultural value contained in Abdul Muluk, the heirs of the tradition took the initiative to reconstruct this performing art. The reconstruction began with re-documenting the

stories, scenes, and elements of the performance. The heirs approached the remaining old players, digging up memories from years past. In-depth and repeated conversations are conducted to uncover important details. The interview stage is accompanied by a meticulous validation process to ensure that every story, scene, and element of the performance remains true to its original form. The results of the documentation are written into a theater script. The reconstruction of traditional arts is a strategy to preserve existence [32]. That step is not merely an effort to revive, but to preserve cultural heritage so that it can be passed on to future generations.

The heirs established the Sereh Serumpun Art Studio to nurture the spirit of preserving ancestral heritage. Sereh Serumpun is a symbol of togetherness. (Sambawi: Interview 10 November 2024). Serumpun means one ancestor. The heirs are the grandfather, the child, and the grandchild. Sereh is lemongrass, a perennial plant that grows in clumps. Lemongrass grows in the same clump. Thus, Sanggar Sereh Serumpun carries a firm philosophy to continue growing and being together.

Since its establishment in 2011, this studio has truly grown together. The revival of Abdul Muluk began in 2013. The spirit of reconstruction was followed up with concrete actions. Rumah Menapo, a Cultural Community in Muarajambi Village, initiated its first performance after decades of silence. The performance was held in the temple parking lot, an open space owned by the people. The performance carries a mission to show the public that Abdul Muluk still exists. (Mukhtar Hadi: Interview 28 November 2024).



Figure 1. Abdul Muluk's Performance in Muarajambi Village, 2013 (source: screenshot of @mdw_Desa Muarajambi's youtube video)

The success of this first performance can be seen from two aspects. First, the collaboration between the older and younger generations. Both generations share the view that Abdul Muluk is a special cultural heritage. Unbeknownst to them, the collaboration between the older and younger generations produces a natural pattern of inheritance. The older people remember, teach, and evaluate. Young people understand, try, and remember. Second, the audience's response. The performance of Abdul Muluk encourages the community to attend as a new moment or a moment of nostalgia. The teenage and child segments of society will make this

performance a new memory, while other segments will use it as a trigger for past memories. The performance intended for the community will be accompanied by support from the community [33].



Figure 2. Abdul Muluk's Performance at the Jambi Provincial Language Office, 2016
(Source: personal documentation)

In 2016, Sanggar Sereh Serumpun was invited to perform in the Oral Tradition Showcase of the Jambi Community organized by the Jambi Provincial Language Office. The performance was held in the courtyard of the Language Office, Telanaipura District, Jambi City. The performance featured ten oral tradition groups from eleven regencies and cities in Jambi Province. Kompangan Art from Jambi City, Lanse from Batanghari, Biduk Sayak from Sarolangun, Ngegah Imau from Kerinci, Ngangkat Dulur from Tebo, Beselang Mping from Bungo, Nyahau Umah from Merangin, Tatah Inai from Tanjungjabung, Tale Nuai from Sungaipenuh, and Abdul Muluk from Muaro Jambi as the grand finale of the performance. Abdul Muluk became one of the most anticipated performances at that time. Language as the main medium of storytelling makes Abdul Muluk more enjoyable and generally more meaningful than performances dominated by movement elements. Abdul Muluk Muarojambi is able to adjust the performance to meet the needs. Several times the observed performances have shown changes, especially in the pantun performances and the dynamic duration of the shows. (Nukman: Interview: 29 November 2024).



Figure 3. Abdul Muluk's Performance at the Meeting Building, Jambi Cultural Park, 2019 (Source: TribunJambi.com)

In 2019, Abdul Muluk once again captivated the audience at the Socialization of the Cultural Advancement Law event at Taman Budaya Jambi. The event was initiated by Commission X of the Indonesian House of Representatives, in collaboration with the Department of Culture and Tourism and the Jambi Cultural Park. Abdul Muluk as a performance at that moment was the government's appreciation for the efforts made by the traditional custodians. The existence of Abdul Muluk is continuously nurtured through active involvement in artistic activities. Abdul Muluk is a traditional theater art that can represent Jambi. The enthusiasm and creativity of the friends from Muarajambi make this performance more refreshing. With the birth of the Cultural Advancement Law, Abdul Muluk's potential is increasingly developing, which is a shared hope. (Titas Suwanda: Interview 29 November 2024).



Figure 4. Abdul Muluk's Performance in Muarabambi Village, 2021 (Source: screenshot of youtube video @Teater AiR Jambi)

Appreciation for Abdul Muluk's art comes not only from the government but also from the art community. In 2021, the AiR Jambi Theater Foundation held the Abdul Muluk Festival. In that series, Abdul Muluk from Semubuk Village and Muarajambi performed as the main feature. People from various villages came to fill the parking lot of the Muarajambi Temple. Activities like this not only impact the preservation of traditions but also boost the economic sector. The arts sector is an integral part of the economy [34]. Lovers of traditional arts will see it from a different perspective. Traditional performances are moments that are hard to replicate. (Rani Iswari: Interview 28 November 2024).



Figure 5. Abdul Muluk's Performance at the Arena Theater of Taman Budaya Jambi, 2021 (Source: personal documentation)

In the same year, Abdul Muluk performed at the Sumatra Theater Meeting at the Jambi Cultural Park. Traditional theater needs to have the opportunity to perform in modern facilities and infrastructure. (Herman: Interview 28 November 2024). The Arena Theater is filled with an audience predominantly made up of young people. That reality shows that Abdul Muluk is accepted across generations. Abdul Muluk has transcended his geographical roots as a performing art in the villages. The activity is an effort to widely pass on traditional arts. The documentation results are utilized by the modern theater community as a foundation for their works.

4 Conclusion

Abdul Muluk, as a traditional theater, has been known to the people of Muarajambi Village since the 1960s. Its development has been marked by ups and downs. The period from 1980 to the end of 2000 was its decline. The heirs realize that this ancestral heritage must be preserved. Therefore, the stories, scenes, and elements of the performance have been reconstructed to closely resemble their original form. The establishment of Sanggar Seni Sereh Serumpun is intended as an effort to preserve tradition. This is the moment of its revival.

The uniqueness of Abdul Muluk's form, language, tone, and attire has received positive attention from various layers of society. His performances, whether in rural or urban areas, are always filled with audiences. The sound of applause and laughter has become a sound memory that is always longed for. The ability to adapt (both on open stages and in performance halls) and to meet the audience's expectations have become the capital for Abdul Muluk from Muarajambi Village to survive and thrive. His performances are always awaited even though the number of people preserving it is not as many as those who anticipate it.

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