

## Oral Tradition: Dramatic and Theatrical Concepts in 'Bari' Performances

Mardiana, Lena, Zolkipli

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

Email: mardiana.ismail@fmstp.upsi.edu.my

### Abstract

'Bari' performances refers to a traditional art in the form of oral tradition. It originates from east coast of Malaysia. At the beginning of its appearance, it served as the basis for other traditional performance, a medical platform and also as an entertainment platform. Through 'Bari' performances, a 'Tok Bari' plays his role as a narrator as well as an intermediary in delivering his performances or medicine. A research has been undertaken to identify the dramatic concepts that shape this art in addition to introducing the theatrical elements contained in 'Bari' performances. This effort is to enhance the understanding of the community while providing attractive value to 'Bari' performances. Dramatic concepts as well as theatrical elements are parsed using the approach of Aristotle Dramatic Theories. Through the process of analysis, this art is introduced as a dramatic and theatrical performance art because it contains elements of the formation of a performance such as spaces, languages, time, story collection, storytelling themes, plot and action as well as characters. The presence of melody, sound and music further strengthens its formation as a dramatic and theatrical performing art. It also shows its uniqueness when 'Tok Bari' who is identified as a shaman has the same role as an actor. This research attempts to find an alternative approach to documenting 'Bari' performances as one of the theatrical arts by emphasizing dramatic concepts in its performances.

**Keywords:** 'Bari' Performances, Tok Bari, Dramatic Performances, Theatrical Performances

### Introduction

Based on the Third Edition of *Dewan* (2002), 'Bari' means Story (old). 'Bari' is a term or dialect commonly used by the eastcoast residents to welcome nearby citizens or family members to watch and listen to 'Tok Bari' telling stories. Therefore, 'Bari' performances can also be defined as a literary piece produced from the stories told by figures with the talent of storytelling, recounting folklores and ancient stories. Figures aforementioned are those who are used to *mene* activities (means traditional performance from east coast of Malaysia such as Makyung, Menora, Selampit, Dikir Laba, Dikir Barat, Bageh, Main Teri, Asyik Joget, Wayang Kulit Kelantan or Siam, Wayang Melayu or Jawa, Wayang Topeng, Tari Inai, Ulek Bubu, Wau, Rebana Kercing, Rebana Mangkuk, Rebana Riba, Rebana Ubi, Rebana Besar, Gasing Pangkah, Main Choh, Sepak Raga, Sepak Bulu Ayam, Tikam Seladang, Kertok, Lokan, Silat Tari, Silat Tongkat dan Belaga Kukoran, etc).

However, *'Bari' performances* isn't as popular as it was before, and it's slowly fading from the society. This is caused by the lack of exposure on this art towards the general public, and they don't know that *'Bari' performances* is also a traditional art in the form of verbal arts. Parallel to the changes in time and the development of technologies, *'Bari' performances* is now only treated as an alternative form of entertainment and not a valuable performance. The respect for *'Bari' performances* is extremely low, neglecting it without any effort to re-create the glory by widely performing it. There should be an appreciation towards *'Bari' performances* before the existing artists decreases by the factor of age and health.

*'Bari' performances* is a significant performance in the development of art and culture among the community in Kampung Gong Manok, Besut, Terengganu and Kampung La Loh, Kuala Krai, Kelantan. Recently, the growth of *'Bari' performances* is halted due to the uprising of various mass media platforms such as Facebook, Netflix, television and radio programmes, films played in the cinemas, Tik Tok, Instagram and others.

Meanwhile, *'Bari' performances* and activities have to compete with the emergence of mass media since surely, virtual viewing is more entertaining than watching *Tok Bari's* performance. Hence, this artwork needs to be documented via (i) recordings followed by (ii) academic research so that its existence can be known as a traditional verbal art performance.

This research was conducted based on the argument and opinions from several scholars such as Rahman (2018); Yousof (2004); Salleh (2005); Isa (1987); Ahmad (2004); Osman (1975); Sheppard (1983); Sweeney (1994); Matusky (1980, 1993); Wright (1980) and Mary Beth Osnes (1992). They succeeded in collecting and obtaining data, analysing them and presenting the data about traditional arts into one research system which later becomes a reference to other researchers. Beginning with the attempt of documentation by the scholars, producers, government and private art agencies, owners of printing publications, mass media and electronic media had started to produce performances based on the findings shared by the mentioned scholars.

Therefore, it proves the understanding and awareness within the community on how important it is to preserve traditional arts and re-deliver them using whatever methods that are suitable need to be encouraged. With that, *'Bari' performances* needs to be lifted to see how far can *'Bari' performances* owned by the community in Kampung Gong Manok and Kampung La Loh impact the industry like the previous traditional arts.

Other than that, to further strengthen the findings and processes of data analysis, this research had chosen to involve Aristotle's Dramatic Theory to convey a more special perspective for *'Bari' performances*.

### **Research Problems**

In the research about *'Bari' performances*, no academic study is found that lifts *'Bari' performances* as a traditional art. This is due to the non-existent studies that focus on the characteristics and artistic structure of *'Bari' performances*. There isn't any study involving the understanding on the function of *'Bari' performances* too.

All the questions above were roused and need to be analysed by first identifying the origins and development. Once certain, the information about *'Bari' performances* can be spread.

These questions were raised with the excuse of representing the responsibility towards the fading traditional arts due to the advancement in technology.

### Research Objectives

There are three objectives in this research which are;

- Analysing 'Bari' performances
- Applying Dramatic Theory as an approach to summarise the functions of 'Bari' performances to show the placement of 'Bari' performances within the community
- Petitioning for 'Bari' performances to be categorised as *Warisan Seni Ungkapan* which shape the culture and identity of the eastcoast community.

### Research Questions

There are three research questions that need a solution to manifest this research;

- How does 'Tok Bari' deliver to show in detail the characteristics and structure of 'Bari' performances?
- Does the community in the eastern coast has rights towards 'Bari' performances, or is it just practised by several activists to empower the cultures in the village? This is an important matter since the origins of 'Bari' performances is an activity that helps to cure the soul and physical of the residents in the community.
- How does the drafting in National Heritage Act 2005 (amendment of Act 645), where Cultural Heritage that is divided into Intangible Heritage and Tangible Heritage, Natural Heritage and Under Water Cultural Heritage gazetted on December 31st, 2005 and enforced on March 1st, 2005 be a guide to maintain and preserve this country's heritage?

### Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative research oriented on instrumental cases. *Multi Method Approach* is applied to obtain research data. Primary data is obtained from a field research that involves an interview using *Tandom Interview* with half-structured questions. The questions were asked towards a *Key Informant* and two additional informants.

Secondary data is obtained by observation on field and related documents. Hence, observation via *Non Participant Observation* is chosen while 'Tok Bari' is performing the 'Bari' performances. The purpose is to obtain a more in-depth data resources.

The secondary data is also obtained from official and unofficial documents such as pictures and video recordings of 'Bari' performances. All these data is interpreted and analysed based on the application of the elements in the Aristotle Dramatic Theory.

### Literature Review

Below is the academic writing related to 'Bari' performances found including an essay entitled *Pendidikan Pendalangan Di Dalam Wayang Kulit Kelantan* written by Jamaluddin Osman. In the writing, Jamaluddin Osman has stated that:

*Someone who wants to master and go deep into storytelling techniques need to be patient. That individual needs to spend at least 7 months to understand everything. In the second month, teachers will teach storytelling and speech techniques.*

*Usually, in storytelling techniques, teachers will teach the students to tell the stories in all episodes. The storytelling processes in the episodes in Maharaja Wana takes a long period of time. Thus, the storytelling process will only end in the third month (final month). After teaching how to storytell, the students will re-tell the episodes (2002 p. 33-52).*

Ismail Hamid in his book entitled *Perkembangan Kesusasteraan Lama* stated that:

*Bari is a storytelling style with less aesthetical values since it's delivered using Kelantan dialect. So the difficulties to understand certain parts of the spoken dialect, causing it to stop only in (Kelantan and its borders, 1987).*

Next, Mardiana with article *Ciri-ciri, Struktur dan Fungsi Dalam Persembahan Seni Berbari* explains that:

*What's special about **Bari Performances** is from the components of "ritual aspects" which are contained in the research structure. Besides, based on the research, it is found that Bari Performances is unique through proofs that it is the foundation of mene, as a healing substance and an entertainment medium. (2016 p.122)*

Apart from that, this research also obtained information from a famous Wayang Kulit mastermind, Pak Nasir. He thinks 'Bari' performances is a storytelling activity. The stories and tales were told orally and passed down from one generation to the next. He also explained that the term 'Bari' comes from the expression of the old people in Kelantan, "*Mari nok Bari, jangelah pulok lari*" which means to invite together to listen to them tell stories.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

### **1) 'Bari' Performances**

*Mene* is the shortform for 'permainan' or performance. For the eastcoast community, every performance art is considered as play art. This shortform usually refers to traditional performances or ceremonies that involve rituals. Figure 1 shows the understanding on the concept of 'Bari' performances in the secular performances in eastcoast.

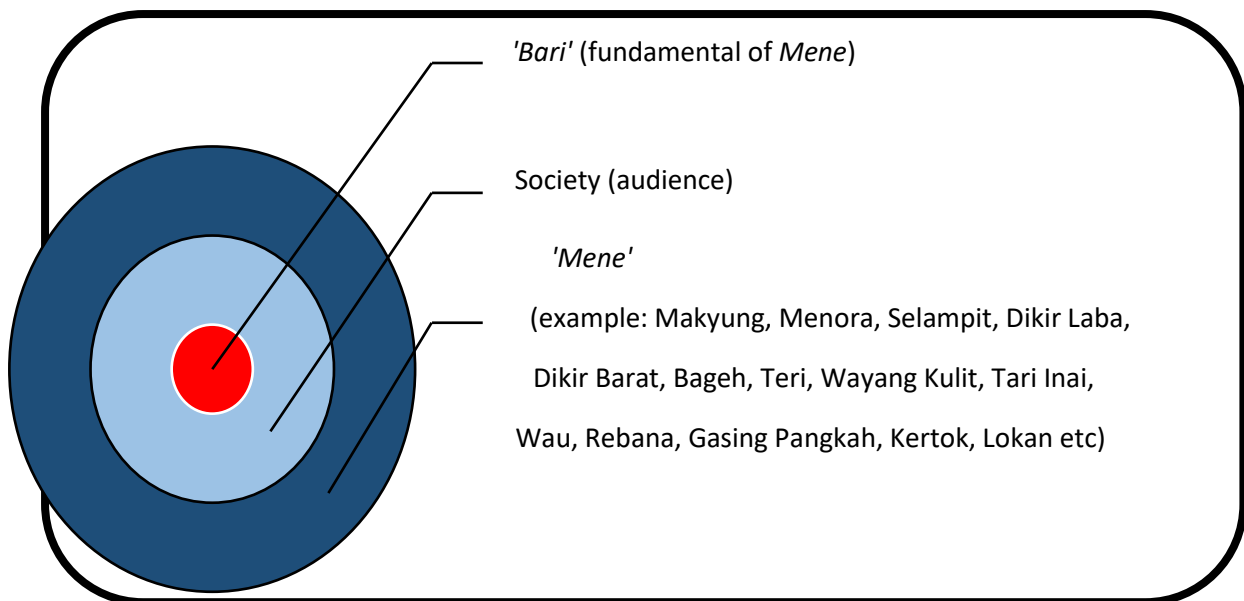


Figure 1 The concept of 'Bari' performances

Sources: Based on data findings - Kelantan and Terengganu Traditional Performances since 2014-2022

This research also pay particular attention to the use of spelling and pronunciation of 'Bari'. Since the communities to these two villages are a Thai minority and have a wide distribution then the differences in pronunciation and spelling may be a confusion. An example of the use of the standard spelling is *Bari* but when referring to the pronunciation of the locals it reads *Ba Ghi*. While some communities in Kampung La Loh call it *Bhar Ghi*. However, the meaning still describes "storytelling". To avoid confusion, this research used the spelling 'Bari', as this word is found in the *Kamus Dewan*.

While Figure 2, displays the levels of mastering 'Bari' performances. It's divided into three education stages which are *Berguru*, *Berlimau* and *Berberi*. Each stage involves imitation by the apprentice through observation of the speech and behavior of their Adiguru (master). Since the study of 'Bari' performances involves imitation system, it has some similarities with informal education. For apprentice without basic blasphemy or not involved in any traditional performance, they will be exposed to learning via "training-view first". Only then, they were allowed to start learning each stage of 'Bari' performances. They must pass each level one by one.

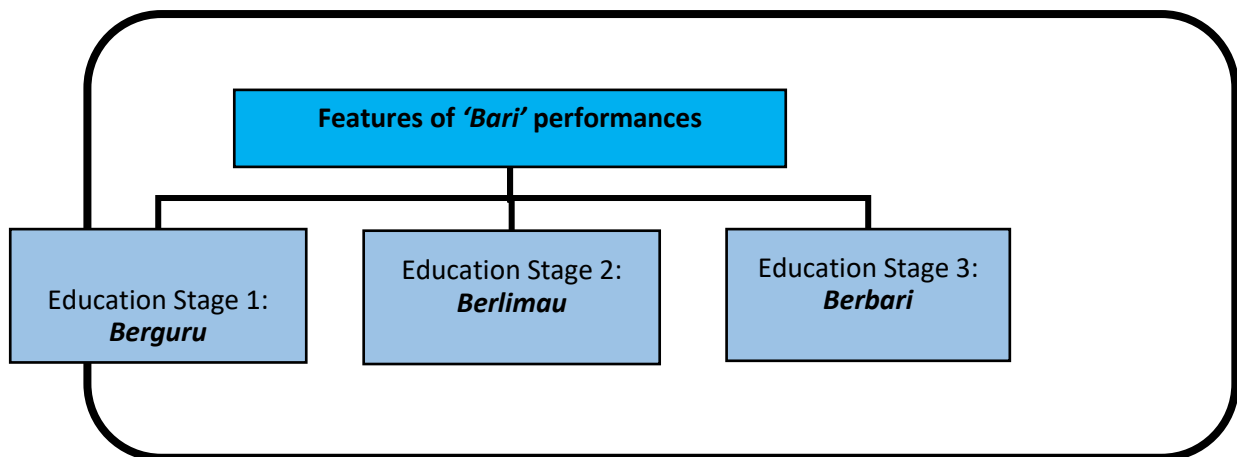


Figure 2 The levels of MASTERING 'Bari' performances

Sources: Based on data findings and involvement of the analysis

## 2) The role of 'Tok Bari' as Shaman and Actor

'Tok Bari' is the main character. During the storytelling, other characters emerge such as male characters, female characters, animal characters, rich characters, poor characters, supernatural characters and various other characters that need to be acted by 'Tok Bari'. The actions are acted through describing words or characters with body movement.

However, in the 'Bari' performances, the most obvious admiration is Tok Bari's ability to relate to supernatural powers directly in his unconscious realm. Every action and conversation of 'Tok Bari' with supernatural powers that takes place directly in front of the eyes of the audience has evoked a spectacular experience of its own.

In order to relate relevantly that 'Tok Bari' has similar characteristics to shamans, a few definitions of shamanism will be presented in this section. Norazit Selat mentions that a shaman is / as an expert in the field of magic and religion (Norazit, 1989). While, Richard Winstedt in *The Malay Magician* (1951 p. 11) argues that shamans in Malaya include bomoh, pawang, dukun and so on.

Also, most traditions of shamanism are inherited from generation to generation, either through word-of-mouth inheritance (Adiguru to their apprentice) or special ceremonies to recognize recipients (Balzer, 1990). Tok Bari's expertise is also usually acquired from generation to generation either by teaching or through several phases as discussed in section of Mastering 'Bari' performances. Table 1 shows the similarities of Shaman and 'Tok Bari' in a ceremony or a performance.

Table 1

*Similarities between Shaman and 'Tok Bari'*

SHAMAN	TOK BARI
as a healer of physical and mental illness	specialist in the healing (penyakit 'Angin')
as preservers of heritage such as stories and songs	expert in the field of oral storytelling
to be the head of spiritual ceremonies and worship	expert in blasphemy ceremonies
fortune tellers and interpreters	bomoh, pawang, dukun
political, economic and social reference experts	reference expert in the social, economic and political matters of his community

**Conclusion**

The world of traditional performance arts in Malaysia is a complex entity, because it consists of various mixtures of tribes and ethnics and some of them are imported by immigrants. In certain circumstances, traditional performances have undergone some modifications to be adapted into local industries. However, the effort to preserve the style and techniques becomes the importance for a community.

Although this research is not intended to resolve the polemics that arise, at least through the discussion, the reader manages to gain a different perspective on the 'Bari' performances. In conclusion, it managed to reach an agreement in defining the position of the 'Bari' performances as a dramatic performance and containing a theatrical aspect.

This art is no longer just known as an art that exists in the world of the east coast community only. Although the future of 'Bari' performances cannot be expected, but with the efforts made, at least we can place it as the identity of the community of Kampung La Loh and Kampung Gong Manok and the entire clump. Hopefully with the birth of this study, the next topic will be extended in order to preserve the function of 'Bari' performances as a symbol to the art and aesthetics of the nation.

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the use of Aristotle's Dramatic Theory approach which includes the elements of theme, ideas and thoughts, plot and action, character and characterization, language and diction, music, melody and sound and the element of admiration is a mechanism to support the idea of the dramatic development of Bari's performance. Meanwhile, the second mechanism is as a crossover to create and produce a performance that contains the style of a theatrical performance. This is important so that Bari performances can continue to be conservation, preserved and restored.

**Acknowledgement**

This paper is based on the research project entitled "*Membina Kandungan Produk Digital dan Fizikal Menerusi Karya Kreatif Sebagai Usaha Melestarikan Pendidikan Seni Persembahan Warisan dan Gunaan Menerusi Pendekatan Art Based Research*". The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the Research Management and Innovation Centre (RMIC), Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI) for the Strategic University Research Grants 3/2022 (code: 2022-0044-107-01) that helped fund the research.

### Corresponding Authors

Dr Mardiana Binti Ismail

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

Email: mardiana.ismail@fmsp.upsi.edu.my

### References

- Salleh, A. S. (2005). *Aspek Lakonan dalam Teater Bangsawan*. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan Malaysia.
- Sweeney, A. (2001). *Wayang Kulit dan Cabarannya Masa Kini Keadaannya Selepas Awang Lah*. Paper submitted for *Festival Wayang Nusantara 27 Oktober - 3 November 2001*. Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Pelancongan.
- Yousoff, G. S. (2004). *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia, Performing Arts, Volume 8*. Singapura: Archipelago Press.
- Yousoff, G. S. (1992). *Panggung Semar Aspects of Traditional Malay Theatre*. Petaling Jaya: Tempo Publishing (M) Sdn. Bhd.
- Yousoff, G. S. (1997). *Angin Wayang: A Biography of a Master Puppeteer*. Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Pelancongan Malaysia.
- Yousoff, G. S. (1983). "Feasting of the spirits: the berjamu ritual performance in the Kelantanese Wayang Siam shadow play." *Kajian Malaysia*. Vol. 1. Jun.
- Piah, H. M. (1979). "Unsur-unsur magis dalam permainan kesenian: Perlu kah dihapuskan atau dipertahankan?". *Dewan Budaya*, Disember: 35.
- Ahmad, H. (1987). *Perkembangan Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama*. Petaling Jaya: Longman Malaysia Sdn Bhd.
- Osman, J. (2002). *Pendidikan Pendalangan Di Dalam Wayang Kulit Kelantan*. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse USM Vol.1 (Jil.1):33-52*
- Mardiana. (2022). *Konsep Dramatik dan Teaterikal Dalam 'Mene Bari'*. Paper Proceeding [eISSN 2756-8199] e-Seminar Penyelidikan Kebangsaan (e-SPK2022), page 279-284
- Mardiana. (2016). *Ciri-ciri, Struktur dan Fungsi Dalam Persembahan Seni Berbari*. Kuala Lumpur: Ultimate Print Sdn Bhd
- Mardiana. (2015). *Seni Berbari*. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara
- Mardiana. (2013). *Seni Berbari di Kampung Gong Manok dan Kampung La Loh: Satu Kajian Kes*. Paper submitted for 2nd MusPA Research Colloquim, 9 November 2013. UPSI
- Patricia, M. (1993). *Malaysian Shadow Play and Music: Continuity of an Oral Tradition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press
- Osman, M.T (1975). *Tradisi Lisan di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan Malaysia.
- Isa, M. M. (1984). *Penglipur Lara Melayu*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd.
- Selat, N. (1989). *Konsep Asas Antropologi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
- Noresah. (2002). *Kamus Dewan Edisi Tiga*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Mubin, S. (1983). *Taman Saujana*. Petaling Jaya Selangor: International Book Service.
- Winstedt, R. O. (1951). *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*. London: Routledge and Paul