

Balancing Tradition and Faith: The Heritage- Maqasid Shariah Dilemma in Johor's Kuda Keping Performance

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Abstract

The Javanese community has been established in Malaysia for a long time, particularly in the state of Johor. Despite the generational distance from their ancestral homeland in Java, Indonesia, this community has retained many aspects of its cultural heritage. One of the most prominent cultural practices that continues to thrive among the Javanese in Johor is the performance of Kuda Keping, a traditional dance that involves dancers riding bamboo or wooden horses. This dance is believed to have been introduced to Malaysia during the migration of Javanese laborers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although it has evolved over time, Kuda Keping remains an integral part of Javanese cultural expression in Johor, particularly in Batu Pahat. The research employed a qualitative case study methodology, focusing on Kuda Keping's performance in Batu Pahat. Data were primarily collected through observation of performances, with particular emphasis on the unique actions displayed by the groups. The study highlights intriguing aspects of Kuda Keping performances, particularly the trance states the dancers enter. These trances are a key feature of the dance's ritual aspect, in which dancers may exhibit extraordinary physical feats or movements under the belief that they are spiritually possessed. However, these trance-induced actions raise concerns under the Maqasid Syariah, the Islamic legal framework that seeks to protect faith, life, intellect, progeny, and property. The study concludes that certain elements of Kuda Keping, particularly the trance performances, pose potential threats to Aqidah Islamiyyah and personal safety. The continuation of these practices is problematic within the framework of Islamic teachings, which emphasize safeguarding spiritual and physical well-being.

Keywords: Culture of Johor, Kuda Keping Performance, Sharia Maqasid

Introduction

The Javanese community has established a deep-rooted historical presence in Malaysia, with the largest concentration identified as residing in the state of Johor. Despite generations of

distance from their ancestral homeland in Java, Indonesia, this community has successfully retained and practiced many aspects of its customary cultural heritage. A primary reason these traditions remain vibrant is that the local Malay communities do not harbor bad prejudices against them, allowing the Javanese to practice their customs peacefully and remain afloat up to the present day. Among these enduring traditions, the Kuda Kepang performance stands out as one of the most prominent cultural practices thriving among the Javanese in Johor, particularly within the Batu Pahat district. Introduced to Malaysia during the migration of Javanese laborers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, this traditional dance involves performers riding bamboo or wooden horse models. Identity within this dance is anchored by three fundamental symbols, namely the music, the costume, and the dance itself.

However, historically and practically, the performance of Kuda Kepang does not escape spiritual and animistic elements. Traditionally practiced by communities living away from cities and large towns, the art form relies on a Javanese belief system rooted in animism, dynamism, and monism, which directly unites theology and ideology in its practice. This spiritual connection manifests vividly in the preparation sajen (offering ceremony), which dancers consume as a method of communicating with supernatural powers. The most controversial aspect of this performance occurs when dancers enter a profound state of intoxication or trance, locally referred to as naik syeh. Facilitated by traditional kejawen rituals, this state causes dancers to lose their memories and sanity for being too solemn. While some magical practitioners claim these occurrences are not inherently syirik because the delicate creatures merely want to participate organically among humans, the trance-induced physical actions displayed during these performances are highly alarming. These behaviors include dancers suddenly floundering, screaming, running fast around the court, tensing their bodies while roaring, slumping to the ground, staggering, and jumping wildly to throw the Kuda Kepang model. Furthermore, qualitative observations in Batu Pahat reveal extreme acts where dancers eat glass fluorescent lights, dance and lie down on sharp glass shards, allow themselves to be overlaid with drums while people stand on them, and peel coconuts using only their teeth.

This intersection of ancestral folklore and Islamic jurisprudence creates a profound socio-religious dilemma, as these trance-induced actions raise severe concerns under the Maqasid Syariah, which seeks to protect faith, life, intellect, progeny, and property. In response, the Mufti Department of Johor issued an official fatwa on July 23, 2013, strictly banning Kuda Kepang performances—whether as a regular dance or dance drama—in any form, time, and place. The fatwa explicitly outlines that the performance contradicts Islamic belief, sharia, and morality, thereby threatening and damaging the sanctity of the Islamic faith (Aqidah) among the public. Under this legal ruling, all Muslims in Johor are strictly prohibited from promoting, practicing, teaching, spreading related print or electronic media, or providing moral and material support to anyone involved in Kuda Kepang performances.

Significance of the Study

Studying the dilemma between the Kuda Kepang heritage and Islamic jurisprudence is critically necessary because it addresses the ongoing tension between preserving traditional arts and adhering to religious frameworks, proving that cultural preservation must not turn its back on religion. This study holds vital importance and utility by operationalizing the

Maqasid Syariah, which serves to protect human rights, strengthen faith, maintain social well-being, and foster national harmony. By focusing on the elements that transpire during the performance, this research directly contributes to the utility of the Malaysian Shariah Index—specifically the cultural sub-index—which dictates that efforts to preserve community art and entertainment must coincide with Islamic patterns and completely avoid elements that are unlawful, negative, or harmful.

The effectiveness and practical utility of this topic directly benefit multiple key stakeholders across religious, cultural, and social domains. For religious authorities and policymakers, this study provides clear qualitative insights into how specific performance elements contradict Islamic teachings, helping them understand how the dancers' sanity is robbed and how these practices expose individuals to self-inflicted destruction. For cultural practitioners and Javanese groups who actively support each other across regions to preserve their art, this research serves as an essential guide for the purification process of the Kuda Kepang performance. It isolates the problematic spiritual elements from the permissible artistic elements, allowing groups to retain their safe creative dance moves, traditional costumes like the *tanjak*, and musical instruments like the drums, *bonang*, and *angklung*, while systematically removing harmful rituals. Ultimately, this study benefits the Muslim public and the local community by safeguarding personal safety and spiritual well-being. It prevents acts that humiliate, fool, or insult human dignity—such as lying on glass shards while being stood upon—and fosters a deeper awareness so that future generations can enjoy a purified form of cultural expression that fully aligns with Islamic Shariah.

Kuda Kepang in Johor

The population of Javanese people in Malaysia has been around for a long time. Most of them were identified as living in Johor. Despite this, they still maintain Javanese customary culture that had migrated from the island of Java, Indonesia. They can still practice Javanese customary culture because the Malays (local communities) do not put bad prejudices. therefore, they can practice it peacefully and remain afloat until now (Likin, 2009).

Siti Islamiah (2012) in her study stated that the Kuda Kepang dance has three symbols underlying the identity, namely music, costume (dress) and dance. Mohd. Ghouse Nasuruddin (1994), on the other hand, the performance of the Kuda Kepang will not escape spiritual elements. This can be seen from the 'preparation *sajen*' ceremony that dancers will eat as one way of communicating with supernatural powers. Additionally, this Kuda Kepang performance has a strange dance move that the dancers can be '*naik syeh*/trance'. This situation results in the dancers losing their memories for being too solemn (Jasman Ahmad & Siti Zaitun, 1996). The Kuda Kepang dance is also danced by people who still defend the anamist culture and arts. This is because those who practice Kuda Kepang dance are usually found to live away from the city and from large towns. So those who are interested in this artistry are those of Javanese descent. At that time alone in Batu Pahat district, Johor a total of no less than 20 existing groups were detected (Kebudayaan 1972- Kenangan 75th Bandar Penggaram).

Then, Mahattama Banteng Sukarno (2020) stated the symbolic phenomenon of possession in the performance of the lumping horse dance as a counter symbol of religious ideology. The harmony of Javanese society was influenced by the Javanese belief system

which was based on animism, dynamism, and monism which directly united theology and ideology in its practice and theory. In the study, Mak Sabar a magical practitioner stated that the possessed happened not because it was summoned, but the delicate creature 'wanted to participate' among humans. The result of the phenomenon of possession in the art of lumping horse dance is not a syirik step. Siti Islamiah Ahmad et al. (2023) in Javanese tradition there is a practice called 'kejawen'. *Kejawen* is used in the ritual process of the Kuda Kepang performance, the purpose of which is to create a state of intoxication when the performance is performed. The tranceness experienced by the dancers can be traced from several acts such as: i) suddenly floundering, ii) screaming, running fast and around the court, iii) tensing the body while roaring, iv) slump to the ground, v) staggering and vi) jumped and threw the model of a Kuda Kepang.

Meanwhile, the Mufti Department of Johor has issued a fatwa banning Kuda Kepang which other states also use as a reference. In an official document belonging to the Mufti Department the latest law on Kuda Kepang performance has been discussed on 23 July 2013 its fatwa:

"For the sake of safeguarding and preserving the sanctity of the Islamic faith of Muslim, whether it is a regular dance, or a dance drama is prohibited in any form, time, and place. This ban is because it can damage the belief of Islam among the public due to its natijah lead to the Kuda Kepang performance that contradict with Islamic belief, sharia, and morality of Islamiah."

Therefore, all Muslims in the state of Johor Darul Ta'zim are prohibited from engaging in Kuda Kepang performance, regular dances, or dramatizations in the following ways:

- i. Promoting, practicing, or teaching it to others, or
- ii. Spread any information relating to the Kuda Kepang performance, regular dance or dramataray either through print media or electronic media, or
- iii. Provides moral or material support or both to anyone involved with the Kuda Kepang performance."

Methodology of Study


The research method used is qualitative. Strauss & Corbin (1997) stated that qualitative research is any research that produces findings that are not through statistical procedures or other forms of calculation (Othman Lebar, 2022). This study focuses on the case study form. Case studies focus on the study of various aspects in dept related to a phenomenon, event, individual, program, activity or process that is unique and specific (Othman Talib, 2013). The purpose of case studies is to describe a descriptive phenomenon or event. A good case study involves several aspects such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, scrutiny of personal or public documents such as diaries, memos, autobiographies, journals, letters, photography and video recording or a combination of several methods at once (Rozmi Ismail, 2017). Data collection using existing data or secondary sources by analyzing past and recent studies related to the current development of the Kuda Kepang performance art. Information and data sources are derived from observations, journals, and online newspapers. This study focuses on the performance activities of Kuda Kepang found in Batu Pahat district in the state of Johor only.




Finding of Research





Previous studies have shown that many researchers have made studies related to the art of Kuda Kepang. The art of this Kuda Kepang has its own uniqueness. This is because dancers will usually present a Kuda Kepang dance performance with creative movements. Then followed by various unique actions to attract the interest of the audience or fan of Kuda Kepang art. Therefore, the researchers tried to unravel the elements related the things that happened during the Kuda Kepang performance.

Those unique actions are often performed by most of the members of the Kuda Kepang group. Even the movement of the Kuda Kepang dance of each group are also different. In addition, the actions are performed under the supervision of the head of the respective Kuda Kepang group. The details of the data related to the actions that occurred while the performance was in progress are as per table 1:

Table 1
Kuda Kepang performance in Batu Pahat, Johor

No.	Elements Kuda Kepang performance	Sub element	Picture
1.	Musical instruments		
			Drums
			Kenong/ bonang
			Angklung

2.	Costumes			Dancers wear uniforms with a “tanjak” over their heads
3.	During the performance	Kuda Kepang “trance”		
				
				Dancer eating glass (fluorescent lights)

			
			Dancers danced on glass shards
			
			The dancer is lying down on the glass shards
			
			Dancers who lying down on shards of glass, overlaid with drums and people standing on them
			
			Dancers peel coconuts using their teeth

Elements that are also studied in this study involved musical instruments, costumes and during performances. The musical instruments used by the group are only drums, bonang and angklung. This group does not use gongs like other Kuda Kepang groups. In addition, the costumes used by the group's dancers are only yellow "tanjak" as accessories for the performance.

Then, during the performance the dancers will usually begin the performance with creative dance moves followed by unique actions as entertainment. These unique acts can make the audience or fans feel awe and amazement at once. This is because the action is difficult to see in public. Unless you can see it up close or experience it yourself for real when there is a Kuda Kepang performance. The acts include dancers eating glass (fluorescent lights), the dancers dancing on shards of glass, the dancers lying down on shards of glass, the dancers lying down on shards of glass overlaid with drums and people standing on them, dancers peeling off coconuts using teeth.

Analysis and Discussion

Sharia is the commandment of Allah delivered through the Quran and As-Sunnah for all human activities including faith, morals, religious jurisprudence, family law, commerce, commercial and criminal law. Maqasid Syariah, on the other hand, is the main objective of sharia, which is to preserve religion, life, intellect, ancestry, and property for human welfare (Al-Raysuni, 1991; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, 2012). Maqasid Syariah covers all aspects of life, socioeconomics as human development, which includes aspects of education and family, which is a complete framework for the development of an Islamic country (Umer Chapra, 2008). According to Al-Ghazali, the needs of daruriyyah are the element without which the state system would be in turmoil. The needs of hajiyyah are elements that make human life easier. Meanwhile, the needs of tahsiniyyah are matters relating to dignity, manners, behavior, morality and ethics that lead to the perfection of life. He further refined these requirements into the maintenance of five (5) important elements (Al-Dharuriyat Al-Khams) which are religion (Ad-Din), life (An-Nafs), intellect (Al-'Aql), lineage (An-Nasl) and wealth (Al-Mal). All five essential elements are prioritized.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Shariah Index is an important initiative by laying a foundation stone for the implementation of shariah in Malaysia in particular, and Islamic countries in general. With the use of this Shariah Index, Malaysia shows seriousness in adopting an integrated and holistic approach to development according to the Islamic framework (JAKIM 2015) as shown in figure 5.0:



Figure 1: Malaysian Shariah Index

The syariah index related to culture is the need for efforts to preserve community culture in terms of art and entertainment, thoughts and ways of life that coincide with Islamic patterns and avoid elements that are unlawful, negative and harmful (Zamri et al. 2016). In responding well to the call, this study focuses on the elements during the Kuda Kepang performance. As already known in the table 4.0, the actions contradict the maqasih sharia related to the care of life.

Islam places great emphasis on life care because life is a trust that needs to be taken care of as a form of devotion to Allah SWT in continuing this life. In addition, taking care of life is also related to the soul. This is because the whole soul of a human includes aspects that involve things that can be seen or touched by the senses. This is because the whole soul of a human includes aspects that involve things that can be seen or touched by the senses. This kind of thing is in line with the prohibition that Islam has explained, which is the prohibition of exposing oneself to danger as His words say:

وَأَنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ وَأَحْسِنُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ١٩٥

“And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction [by refraining]. And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good.”

(Al-Baqarah: 195)

Things that endanger oneself include dancers who are trance or delusional and dancers who eat glass (fluorescent lights). The dancer's sanity has been robbed to the point that their actions can bring harm to themselves. This can result in injury to the gums because of chewing on glass. In addition, Islam forbids its people to fool, humiliate and insult themselves. This matter can be seen in terms of how humans themselves can perform such unique actions just to provide entertainment to the audience without concern for their own safety. This is in accordance with the words of Allah SWT:

﴿وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا ٧٠﴾

“And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.”

(Al-Isra': 70)

This act of fooling, humiliating, and insulting is like the act of a dancer lying down on broken glass, overlaid with a drum musical instrument and a person standing on the instrument. The situation clearly insults people because to give a sense of amazement to the audience, the dancers are willing to perform the action even though they are unconscious because they are "trance".

Conclusion

The performance of Kuda Kepang is still active in the Batu Pahat district. The performance is not only performed by a group of Kuda Kepang who live in the local area. In fact, groups from other regions can also perform Kuda Kepang in certain regions according to requests or invitations received by each group. This is because those who are active in the art of Kuda Kepang help each other and support other groups so that the art of Kuda Kepang can still be

preserved. This shows that they can communicate well so that they can avoid the occurrence of fights between groups with other groups.

However, preserving art should not turn its back on religion. This matter refers to matters related to maqasid sharia. Maqasid sharia is very important because Islam protects its people in strengthening faith, preserving human rights, maintaining social well-being and national harmony. When this sharia maqasid is well understood and practiced, then everyone will race to do good things. Next is to give awareness that if they want to maintain the art of Kuda Kepang, then they will perform in accordance with Islamic Shari'a.

The implications of this study show that the kuda kepan performance is still practiced according to the creativity of each group. Nevertheless, the unique actions performed by trance Kuda Kepang dancers are still performed even though they invite danger to themselves. In fact, they feel proud that the act can entertain the audience. Although those unique actions are a question mark because the act is difficult for ordinary people to do in a sane state. Therefore, the art of Kuda Kepang performance needs to be researched in depth so that the unique actions have a clearer purpose. At the same time, it is possible to unravel which actions are appropriate to practice or perform the purification of braid horse performance so that the art can still be enjoyed by all generations and society.

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