

## **Islam and Malay Culture in Dabus Performances in Perak Malaysia**

### **Islamismo e Cultura Malaia em Espectáculos de Dabus em Perak Malásia**

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**ABSTRACT:** Malaysia possesses a distinct cultural philosophy in its national cultural policy, emphasising the establishment of a strong nation. Islam plays a central role in this philosophy, and artistic expressions should reflect Islamic principles, as has been the case since the religion's arrival

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in the Malay Peninsula. A key question that arises concerns which Islamic paradigm (*mazhab*) should serve as the foundation for Malay artistic creation. This article advocates for the concept of “Malay Islam,” which signifies the integration of Islam and Malay culture in all aspects of life, including the practice of Dabus. A two-year field study with the Tanjung Bidara Dabus troupe in Perak, Malaysia, revealed that: (1) the structure of Dabus performances closely aligns with Islamic values; (2) the function of Dabus performances is rooted in social welfare, guided by Islamic principles; (3) the core meanings and values embedded in Dabus performances are based on Islamic monotheism (*ketauhidan*); and (4) Islamic foundations are essential in shaping Malay art as a counterbalance to Western aesthetic influences.

**KEYWORDS:** Dabus Performance, Islam, Malay Culture

**RESUMO:** A Malásia possui uma filosofia cultural distinta em sua política cultural nacional, enfatizando o fortalecimento da nação. O Islão desempenha um papel central nessa filosofia, e as expressões artísticas devem refletir os princípios islâmicos, conforme tem ocorrido desde a chegada da religião à Península Malaia. Uma questão fundamental que surge diz respeito a qual paradigma islâmico (*mazhab*) deve servir de fundamentar para a criação artística malaia. Este artigo defende o conceito de “Islã Malaio”, que representa a integração do Islã e da cultura malaia em todos os aspectos da vida, incluindo a prática do Dabus. Um estudo de campo de dois anos com o grupo de Dabus Tanjung Bidara, em Perak, Malásia, revelou que: (1) a estrutura das apresentações de Dabus está intimamente alinhada com os valores islâmicos; (2) a função das apresentações de Dabus está enraizada no bem-estar social, guiada pelos princípios islâmicos; (3) os significados e valores centrais incorporados nas apresentações de Dabus são baseados no monoteísmo islâmico (*ketauhidan*); e (4) as fundamentos islâmicas são essenciais na formação da arte malaia como um contraponto às influências estéticas ocidentais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Apresentação de Dabus, Islão, Cultura Malaia

## 1. Introduction

Art is a vital subject because it directly relates to society's emotions and feelings. Additionally, art can shape inclinations, tastes, and career orientations through listening, reading, seeing, feeling, and thinking (Qardhawi, 2019). Art in the Islamic world has been recognized since the time of the *Tabi'in*. For example, theories discussing the creation and appreciation of music were popular among Muslims at that time (Yusof, 1999).

Long before the arrival of Islam in the Malay Peninsula, the Malay Society demonstrated a high degree of adaptability and creativity. This capability became the cornerstone of Malay cultural patterns. When Islam arrived, it strengthened the society by significantly changing Malay thought and behaviour (Pulungan, 2009; Sirjani, 2014; Attas, 1990). The interaction of the Malay society with Islamic values gave rise to a noble Malay culture (Din, 2016). Through Islamic cultural characteristics, the Malay society became acutely aware of the position of the Islamic creed in the broader social system (Hamka, 2016). The art produced serves as a testament to the adaptive intelligence of the Malay people and an artefact of the longstanding relationship between Islam and the Malay Peninsula (Zakaria, 2012).

Various performing arts (theatre, dance, and music) have emerged as a fusion of the Malay Society with their social and natural ecosystems. Thus, the arts produced by the Malay community, while demonstrating Islamic solid identity, also function as a social medium grounded in Islamic values (Takari, 2005). The Malay Society believes Islamic values do not contradict artistic expression (Sikana, 1966). Qardhawi (1994) also emphasized that artistic activities are permissible if they adhere to Islamic values.

From an Islamic perspective, art should align with the Malay viewpoint that Islam remains relevant across all eras. If artistic values conflict with Islam, they should be reevaluated and adapted creatively to fit Islamic principles (Din, 2016). Since the advent of Islam in the Malay Peninsula, the Society has produced art that adheres closely to Islamic values, including the therapeutic function of art (Kadir, 2007, 1992, 2002). Ethical values are fundamental to creating Islamic art (Gazalba, 1988).

Human-made art contains values beyond mere beauty (Sumardjo, 1983). Hegel (1975, 1979) asserted that art represents a dialectical momentum of human emotions towards perfection. Thus, art elicits a sense of beauty and pleasure, which the Quran describes as a way to appreciate God's greatness bestowed upon humanity (Qardhawi, 2002).

Islamic art is concerned with the materials used to create art and with religious consciousness. Therefore, art in Islam cannot be separated from spiritual goals. Islamic art reflects humanity's spiritual journey (Nasr, 1993). Gazalba (1988) proposed three main concepts in Islamic art: (1) the concept of good to aesthetic form, (2) the concept of good concerning ethics, and (3) the concept of truth about art as science and belief, such as religion.

Nasr (1997) argued that everything related to humans, including aesthetics, leads to monotheism. Absolute beauty exists only in God and His will, as expressed through His word. Therefore, Islamic art encompasses all historical products with aesthetic value created by Muslims in harmony with Islamic civilization. Moreover, art in Islamic culture is seen as an aesthetic expression of the Quran, so Islamic art is essentially Quranic (Faruqi, 1995). Just as science and religion guide humanity's progress, so does art (Sumardjo 1983).

Islamic art also encompasses an Islamic cosmology that emphasises God as the sole source of all existence, governing and interconnecting everything beneath Him. All elements within this cosmology move dynamically in a fundamentally harmonious and balanced pattern (Nasr, 1993). However, tensions between Muslims and aesthetic expressions often arise due to varying interpretations, leading to aesthetic works being assessed through the lens of religious law (Audah, 1993). Nevertheless, Nasr (1993) explicitly asserts that a work of art can be considered Islamic not merely because it is created by a Muslim but because it is fundamentally grounded in divine revelation.

In line with this, through the 1971 Cultural Congress, Malaysia established the National Cultural Policy, which encompasses three main views: (1) the National Culture of Malaysia should be based on the indigenous culture of the region; (2) elements of other cultures that are suitable and appropriate can be integrated into the national culture; (3) Islam is an essential element in the formation of the national culture (Din, 2016). Based on this, the art of Dabus, which originated long before the National Cultural Policy was declared, has focused on Islam as its creative foundation.

The Dabus dance has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad and is associated with the heroism of Sayyidina Ali (Ghouse, 1994; Asmad, 1990). The village of Telaga Nanas is the birthplace of Dabus in 1600 (Moraza, 1994). Dabus derives from the word "*Dabbus*," a sharp iron shard (Atjeh, 1993, 1994). Purnama (1998) noted that in Aceh, Dabus is called *Rapa'I*. Nasution (1995) stated that the Dabus is performed in two forms: the Dabus tarekat and the Dabus science. Regarding the Dabus game, Muzakki (1990) and Nasution (1995) stated that Dabus is a game that combines Islamic and local traditions.

The establishment of the Tanjung Bidara Dabus group is believed to have started centuries ago and has continued into the current generation. Although its origin cannot be precisely determined, preserved information indicates that Tanjung Bidara village is one of the earliest places where Dabus performances were found. Although it cannot be said to be in first place in the Malay Peninsula, it is considered part of the first generation of Dabus in the Malay Peninsula.

The Tanjung Bidara Dabus group has reached its seventh generation, starting with the first generation around 1818 AD. At this time, Islam had already established itself in Malay society, given

Islam's arrival in the Nusantara. While much debate surrounds this issue, it is generally believed that Islam arrived in the Malay Peninsula in the 12th or 13th century AD (Rajendran, 1993).

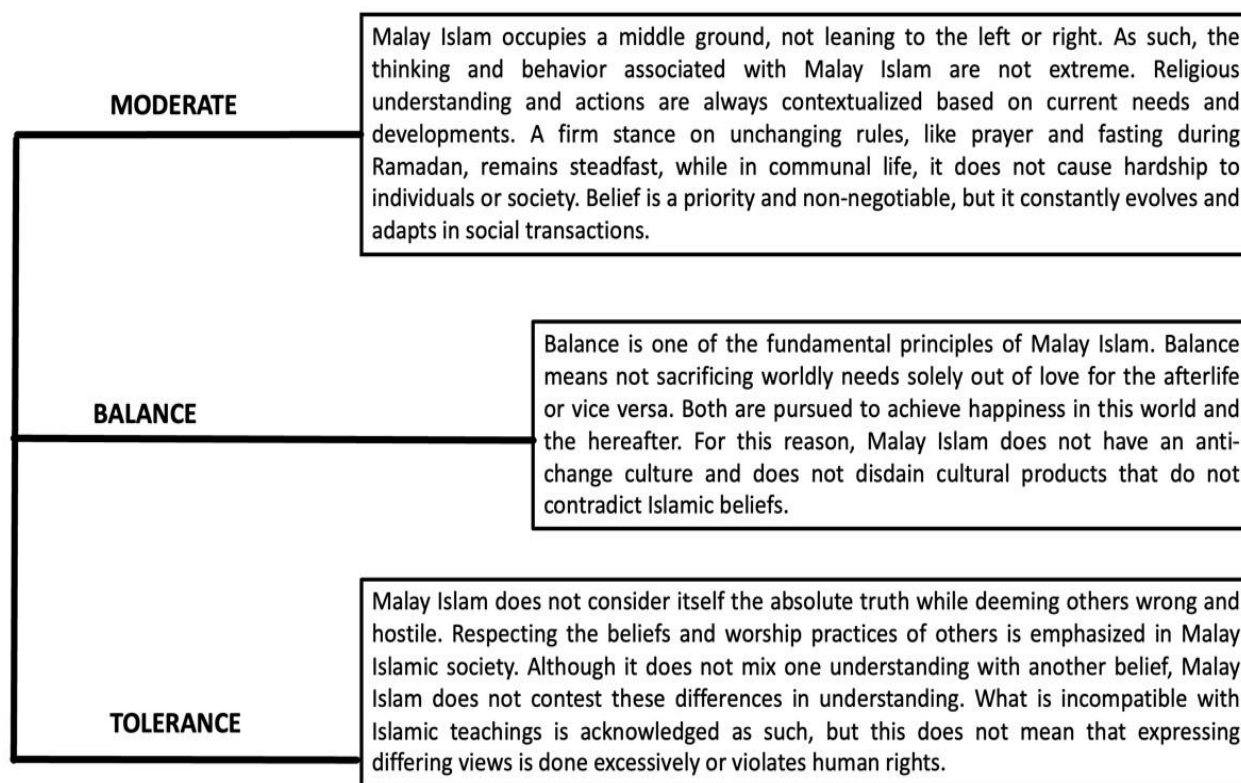
As previously stated, the Bidara village Dabus group was one of many, as it had arrived in Pasir Panjang Sitiawan, Perak, around the 18th century. Shortly after, it spread to Bagan Datoh and then to Kuala Selangor. The journey of Dabus among these three locations took little time, as it soon arrived in Tanjung Bidara village.

According to various sources, the Tanjung Bidara village Dabus group is the longest continuously existing ensemble. This continuity is evidenced by an uninterrupted succession of performers. Although the succession system is not highly structured, each generation remains committed to involving their descendants in Dabus performances. Consequently, lineage-based succession has been the sole mechanism sustaining the Tanjung Bidara village Dabus group. Given this reality, the group serves as a pertinent example of Malay art that seamlessly and strongly integrates Islam and Malay culture.

## **2. Malay Islam**

Malay Islam is a concept that portrays the identity of Malay society, emphasizing Islamic values in communal, national, and state life that has been practised in the Malay Peninsula since Islam was embraced by early Malay society. Politeness, respect, tolerance, and compassion in worship and social interactions are fundamental aspects of Malay Islam. Malay Islam consistently prioritizes a moderate Islamic perspective, adhering firmly to Islamic values as a force for good for all of humanity. Therefore, Malay Islam also reflects a society that embraces diversity and respects human rights.

In addition to focusing on Islamic values, Malay Islam is open to all forms of goodness, regardless of their origin. The approach distinguishes between right and wrong, maintaining a firm stance. However, this does not hinder Malay Islam from engaging with all layers of society. Malay Islam does not consider one view of Islam to be the absolute truth while dismissing other perspectives as incorrect or misguided. Malay Islam prioritizes the welfare of all humankind over blaming other groups in society. With a balanced mindset, Malay Islam can coexist, cooperate, and live harmoniously with people of other religions.



**Figure 1.** Malay Islamic principles

Malay Islam is founded on three fundamental principles: moderation, balance, and tolerance (Figure 1). These three foundational principles are implemented concurrently and without hierarchy. Based on these principles, Malay Islam seeks to establish an Islam that aligns with local communities, creating new social and cultural features without erasing the original culture. Social interaction in Malay Islam's perspective should only partially mirror the original Islamic culture, which is Arabic. It needs to be adjusted to create an Islamic order that benefits humanity.

Malay Islam is built on the foundation of cultural and religious diversity in the Malay Peninsula. Essentially, this practice has long been followed by the early Muslims in the Malay Peninsula. Thus, in daily life, Malay Islam is evident in many activities that have become Malay customs. Celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday, Isra and Mi'raj, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha, as well as prayer and thanksgiving ceremonies, are all distinct forms of Malay Islam. Weddings and welcoming newborns are also unique expressions of Malay Islam. Everything in art is intrinsically tied to the Malay character, united with Islamic values.

### **3. Monotheism (*Ketauhidan*) in Dabus Performances**

Discussing monotheism often involves three aspects: monotheism as a religious experience, as a worldview, and as the essence of civilization (Faruqi, 1992). The religious experiences of Dabus activists are interpreted as their overall spirituality in daily life, within their communities, and in

matters related to the art of Dabus. They are bound by the belief that they must benefit society or, at the very least, not cause problems. In the context of the Khalifah, the highest leader in Dabus, there is always religious consciousness, meaning a Dabus Khalifah must exemplify good character to the community.

These religious experiences are rooted in the fact that, since the first generation of the Dabus group in Tanjung Bidara village, they have embraced Islam as a way of life. Before that, their ancestors were already familiar with Islamic values in daily life. A broader perspective on the world or natural environment is clearly visible in the source of inspiration for the creation of Dabus art. The terms they choose are intrinsically linked to their natural surroundings. In this context, Dabus activists have a strong awareness of natural cosmology. Consequently, every form of Dabus performance they create is closely related to the environment and its ongoing development.

In the context of Dabus, the essence of civilization can be found in Dabus itself. As part of Malay culture, Dabus has played a vital role in several sectors of Malay society's development. The role of Dabus art is undeniable in facilitating the seamless integration of Islamic values with early culture. Morphologically, the form of Dabus performances seems to fulfil the requirements for Islamic art. In terms of clothing, for instance, the attire covers the bodies of both men and women. The clothing is designed according to Malay styles and patterns. The same applies to the songs performed. The message conveyed by Dabus is closely related to Islamic values, as evident in the following excerpts from Dabus's performance lyrics:

*Adam Siti Hawe  
Datuk nenek moyang kite  
Mari di Jedah du luar kote  
Batu nisannya berjajar tige*

*Banyak hari perkare hari  
Hari Jumaat uamh sebenar hari  
Banyak nabi perkara nabi  
Nabi Muhammad sebenar nabi*

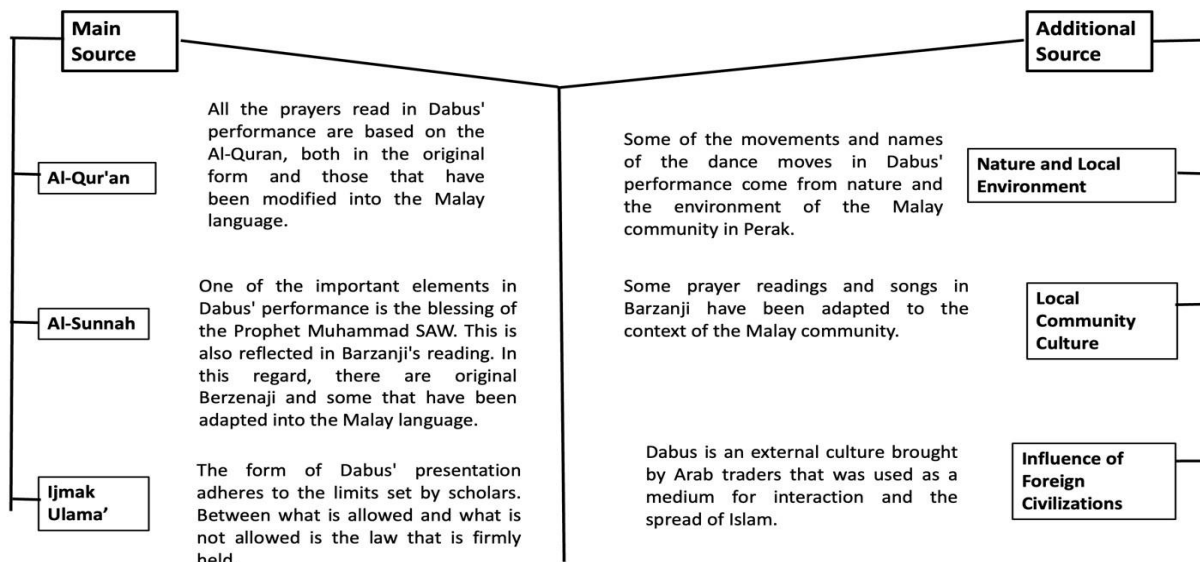
(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

(Translated version)

Adam and Eve  
Our forefathers and foremothers  
Arrived in Jeddah, just outside the city  
Three gravestones aligned in a row  
Many days, but Friday is the true day  
Many prophets, but Muhammad is the true prophet

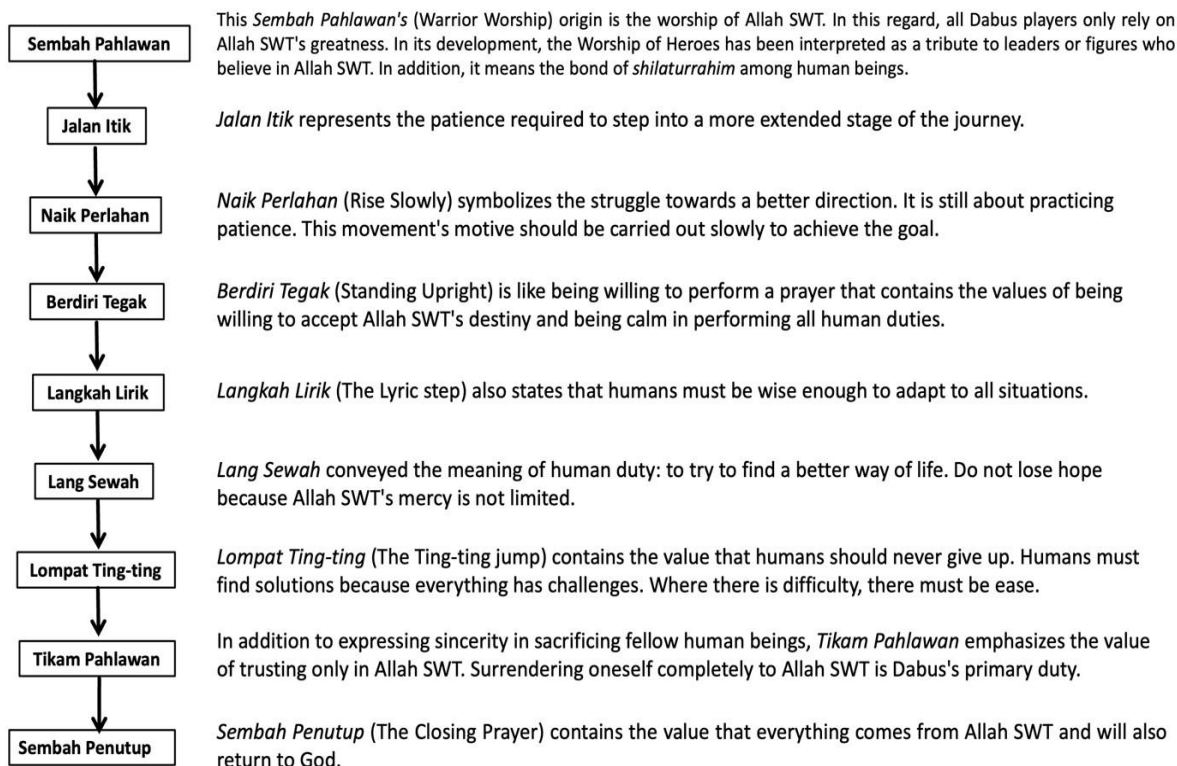
(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

Moreover, in reference to the concept of Islamic art, as discussed by the aforementioned scholars, the Dabus performance is inherently intertwined with Islamic values. The subsequent diagram provides a concise overview of this concept:



**Figure 2.** Sources of Dabus performance creation based on the concept of Islamic art and the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

Dabus, as performed within the Malay society, exhibits distinct Islamic characteristics in its performance structure. Each movement embodies Islamic values, interwoven with Malay cultural elements rooted in profound religious beliefs. The following diagram provides a summary of the Islamic elements embedded within the structure of the Dabus performance:



**Figure 3.** Dabus performance structure based on the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

The Dabus performance, as depicted in the diagram, reflects a structured integration of Islamic monotheism (*ketauhidan*) through its sequential movements, each of which embodies a fundamental



aspect of devotion to Allah SWT. The initial movement, *Sembah Pahlawan*, establishes the act of worship as the foundation of the performance, reinforcing the concept that all strength and honour derive from Allah SWT alone. The gradual progression of movements, from *Jalan Itik* to *Lompat Ting-ting*, symbolises the human struggle towards righteousness, patience, and perseverance, aligning with the Islamic principle that life's trials are divinely ordained and must be met with faith and steadfastness. The references to divine mercy, human duty, and unwavering trust in Allah SWT within movements such as *Lang Sewah* and *Tikam Pahlawan* further reinforce the centrality of tawhid, emphasising absolute reliance on the divine will. The final act, *Sembah Penutup*, encapsulates the ultimate submission to Allah SWT, signifying that all existence originates from and ultimately returns to Him, thereby integrating the entire performance into a continuous act of monotheistic devotion.

The details of the Dabus performance are divided into three parts: the Opening Prayer, the Middle Section, and the Closing Prayer. This structure is further illustrated in the ensuing diagram:

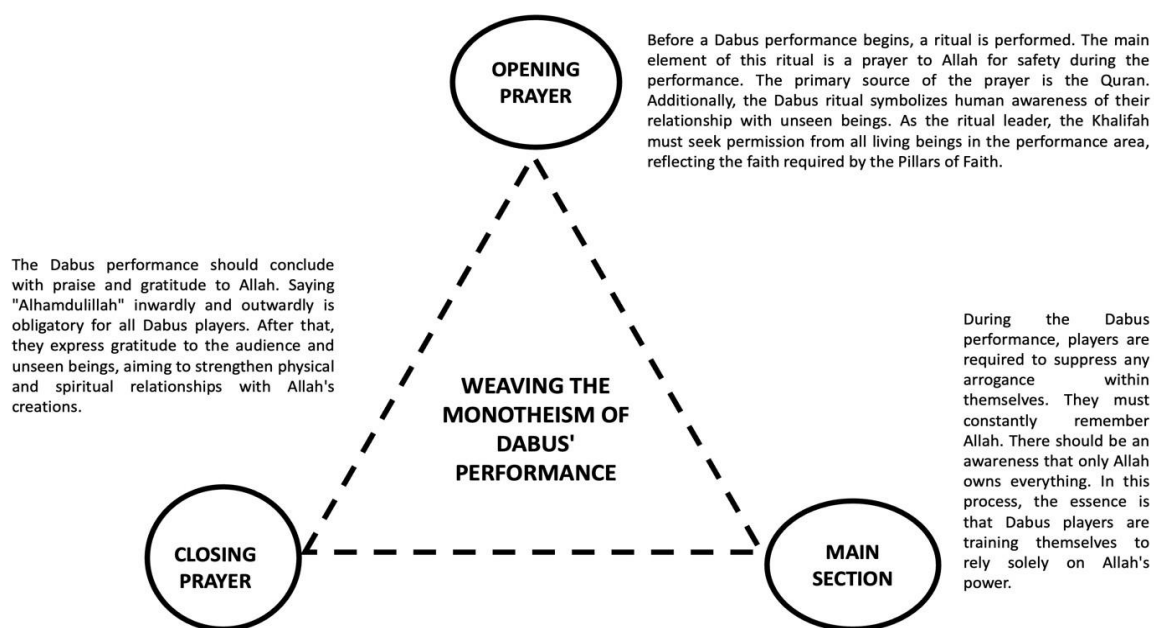


Figure 4. Interweaving of Dabus performance monotheism based on the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

The interconnectedness of monotheism in Dabus performances is deeply interwoven, with each element mutually reinforcing the others in pursuit of a common objective: the dissemination of Islamic values. Consequently, every aspect of the performance incorporates elements that reflect Islamic principles. For instance, in both the opening and central sections of the performance, certain songs convey Islamic values, as demonstrated by the subsequent lyrics.

*Tuan Haji berbaju jubah  
Pergi ke padang berburu rusa  
Orang mengaji memuji Allah  
Orang sembahyang mengampun dosa*

*Syed Hassan Syed Hussein*

(Translated version)

Mr. Haji in a robe  
Goes to the field to hunt deer  
People reciting praise Allah  
People praying for forgiveness

*Anak cucu Rasulallah  
Mati Hassan tinggal Hussein  
Mati berperang Sabilullah*

*Batu putih serban putih  
Lalu dibawa pergi sembahyang  
Allah kasih Muhammad kasih  
Rasulullah terlalu sayang*

*Tuan Haji berbaju jubah  
Pergi ke padang berburu rusa  
Orang mengaji memuji Allah  
Orang sembahyang mengampun dose*

*Tetak tebu kilaskan dayung  
Hendak mendayung selat Melake  
Tuntut ilmu buat payung  
Buat mending api nerake*

(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

Syed Hassan, Syed Hussein  
Descendants of the Prophet  
Hassan died, leaving Hussein  
Died fighting in the path of Allah

White stone, white turban  
Then taken to pray  
Allah loves, Muhammad loves  
The Prophet has great affection

Mr. Haji in a robe  
Goes to the field to hunt deer  
People reciting praise Allah  
People praying for forgiveness

Cut sugarcane, flip the oar  
To row across the Straits of Malacca  
Seek knowledge, make it an umbrella  
To shield from the fires of Hell

(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

The lyrics of the Dabus song reflect a profound integration of Islamic values, particularly in their emphasis on monotheism and spiritual devotion. The repeated references to acts of worship, such as praising Allah and seeking forgiveness, signify the central role of dhikr in Islamic practice, reinforcing the believer's connection to the divine. The mention of Syed Hassan and Syed Hussein, direct descendants of the Prophet, invokes the historical memory of sacrifice and steadfastness in upholding the faith. Their struggles, particularly Hussein's martyrdom in the path of Allah, symbolise ultimate submission and perseverance, aligning with the Islamic notion of jihad, not merely as a physical struggle but as a journey of spiritual purification. The white stone and white turban imagery, followed by prayer, conveys the purity and sacredness associated with Islamic rituals, reinforcing the belief that devotion to Allah is a path to divine love and mercy.

The metaphorical expressions within the lyrics extend beyond direct religious references to encompass broader Islamic values on knowledge and moral responsibility. The cutting of sugarcane and flipping of the oar serve as symbolic gestures, representing the effort required to navigate life's challenges, akin to the perseverance needed in spiritual endeavours. The journey across the Straits of Malacca signifies the pursuit of knowledge, an obligation in Islam that serves as both enlightenment and protection. The verse underscores the necessity of education as a shield against spiritual ruin, likening it to an umbrella that safeguards believers from the fires of Hell. This analogy reflects a core principle in Islamic epistemology, where knowledge is not merely intellectual acquisition but a means of attaining righteousness and proximity to Allah. The recurring imagery of hunting and traversing landscapes reinforces the notion that faith is a journey requiring active engagement, discipline, and a constant striving for divine closeness.

#### 4. Islamic Elements in the Function of Dabus

From the perspective of the audience and observers, the function of art is to serve as a ritual tool. Second, as personal entertainment, and third, art functions as an aesthetic performance (Soedarsono, 2002). The ritual function in Dabus performances is more of a prayer directed to Allah. The prayers are based on the Quran, crafted in Malay, and original prayers in Arabic. In Mat Rosnan’s experience performing Dabus, society often misunderstands this ritual. Therefore, some Malays equate Dabus rituals with ancient Malay culture. However, Mat Rosnan clarifies that the essence of Dabus rituals is a prayer for the safety and well-being of the Prophet Muhammad.

In the context of Dabus as entertainment, here is an excerpt from Mat Rosnan’s statement:

“In terms of entertainment, at least we entertain those who are troubled. We hope they are entertained by watching Dabus performances. However, the most important thing is that through Dabus performances, we can strengthen relationships among people. As our ancestors advised, we must maintain friendships through Dabus. Since I was a child, it has been ingrained in my mind how important Islamic social values are in Dabus.” (Mat Rosnan: Interview April 13, 2022, October 15, 2022, July 17, 2023, in Tanjung Bidara, Perak).

Regarding Islam, the function of Dabus performances has evolved according to Islamic values.

The following diagram summarizes the meaning and value of Dabus performances:

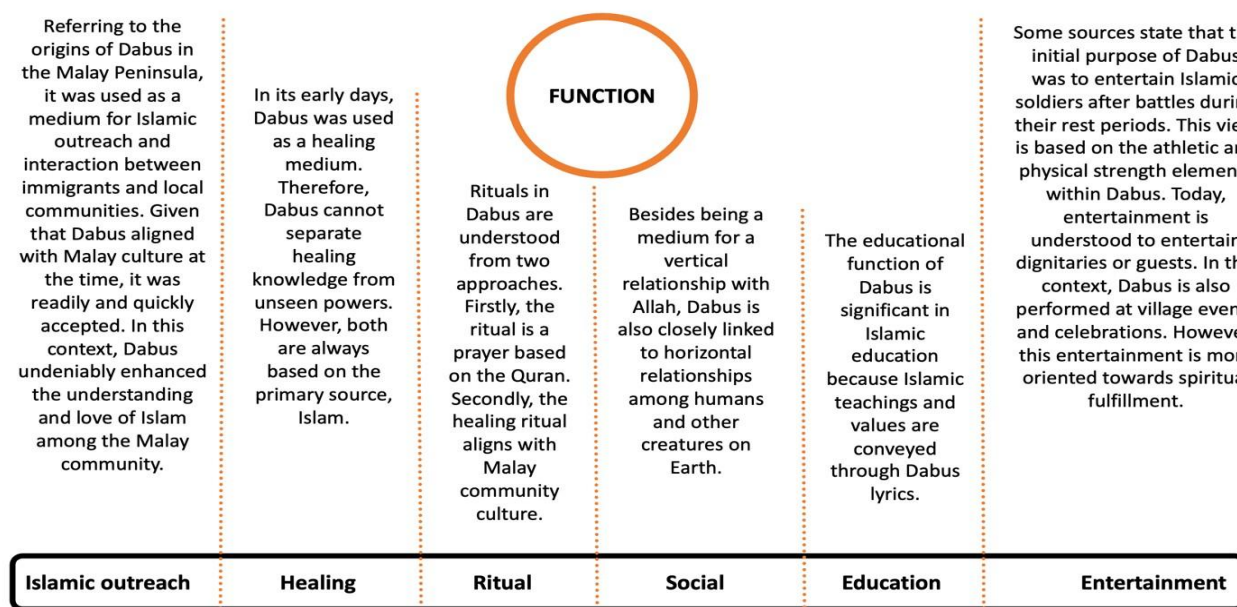
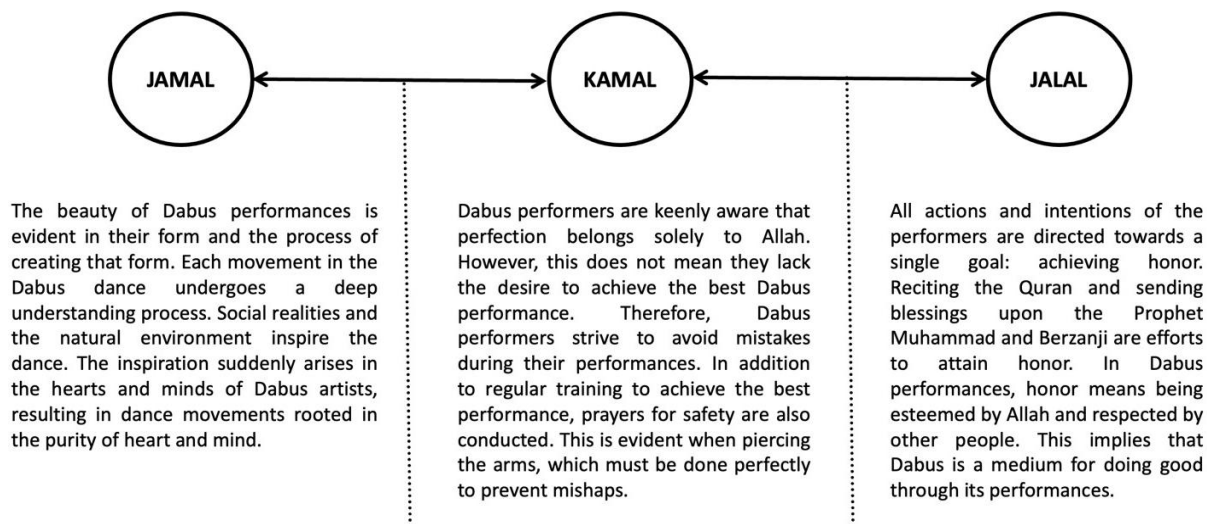


Figure 5. Islamic elements in the performance of Dabus based on the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

The nature bestowed by God upon humans encourages the expression of emotions through art. Art is fundamentally the creation of beauty, whether in the form of a tangible product or the process of its appreciation (Yulika, 2016). Referring to various Islamic art concepts proposed by Gazalba (1988, 1977), Qardhawi (2019), Nasr (1993), and Kuntowijoyo (1987), with the most significant

being the framework established by Abdullah (1984), the diagram below illustrates the Islamic elements embedded in the structure of Dabus:



**Figure 6.** The concept of Islamic art in Dabus performances based on various sources and interviews with Mat Rosnan.

Similar to the Islamic aesthetic concept in Dabus performances discussed earlier, the principles of *Jamal*, *Kamal*, and *Jalal* are also applicable. Dabus performances incorporate elements of beauty (*Jamal*) that are intrinsically linked to Islamic values, aiming to exalt Allah's perfection. The objective of Islamic aesthetic principles in Dabus is to attain honour in the sight of Allah, as Malay cultural foundations are deeply rooted in faith in Allah (Abdullah, 1984).

The art of Dabus is expressed through various elements to achieve a state of honour, one of which is singing. However, the lyrics must adhere to the fundamental principle of glorifying Allah.

The following is an excerpt from the intended lyrics:

*He Allah he Allah  
Hodal hema kheya maulai  
He Allah he Allah  
Lama mahbub se wa Allah*

*Mura di seng Allah mura diseng  
Kama la izin Allah mura di  
Mura di yah Allah mura di yah  
Kama la izin Allah mura di*

*Bishahrin rabie  
Qad bawa nuruhul a'la  
Faya hab baz badru  
Bizal kal hema yujla*

*Mura disin, Alloh mura disin  
Kamala izin Allah muradin  
Mura diya Allah mura diya  
Kamala izin Allah muradin*

*Tanaqal fi adhlabi arbabi sudadin  
Kazal' shamsufi abrajaha tatanaqqal*

*Sa le la mahkota alam  
Bukit zaman kubur aulia  
Mari dituntut besi yang tajam  
Buat penawar besi yang bisa*

*Alhadmulillah hilazi a'toni  
Hazal ghula mal taiibal azdani*

(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

The lyrics of the Dabus song exhibit a deep integration of Islamic values and artistic expression, reflecting the genre's spiritual and communal significance. The frequent invocation of "He Allah He Allah" and phrases such as *mura di yah Allah mura di yah*, meaning "my desire is with Allah", demonstrate the song's emphasis on divine glorification and submission. Additionally, the Arabic phrases *Bishahrin rabie Qad bawa nuruhul a'la* suggest a connection to the Prophet Muhammad, particularly in celebrating his virtues and illuminating presence. The lyrical structure alternates between Arabic and Malay, reinforcing the cultural synthesis characteristic of Dabus, where local traditions intertwine with Islamic devotional elements. This bilingual composition suggests an effort to make the religious message both universally resonant and locally comprehensible, ensuring accessibility to the broader Malay Muslim audience.

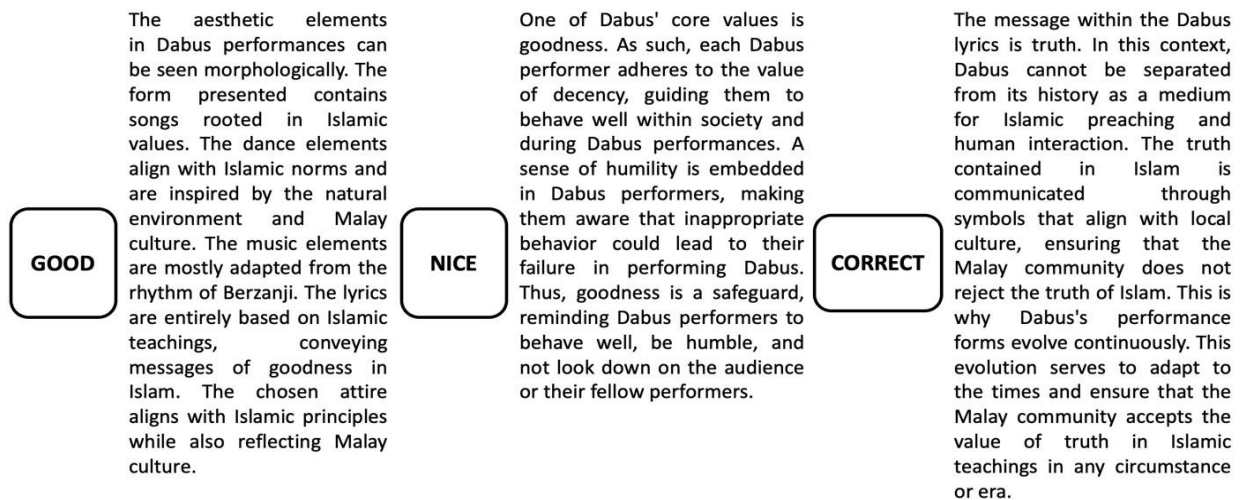
In terms of metaphors the lyrics further illustrate the spiritual and moral dimensions of Dabus. The imagery of the sun *Kazal' shamsufi abrajaha tatanaqqal* symbolises divine guidance, while the references to *besi yang tajam* sharp iron and *besi yang bisa* poisonous iron metaphorically depict the trials of faith and the necessity of inner purification. Such symbolism aligns with Sufi-inspired teachings often embedded within Islamic artistic traditions where physical endurance, often represented in Dabus through martial and rhythmic movements, mirrors spiritual perseverance. The closing expression, *Alhamdulillah hilazi a'toni*, conveys a sense of gratitude for divine sustenance, reinforcing the song's overarching themes of devotion, resilience, and submission to Allah's will. Through these elements, the Dabus song serves not merely as a performance but as a means of spiritual reinforcement and moral instruction within the community.

## **5. The Meaning and Islamic Values of Dabus Performances**

The art of Dabus will continue to develop and be created in accordance with society's needs. This continuity is due to the fact that Dabus serves to fulfil personal, social, and physical needs (Feldman, 1967). Like other forms of art produced by the Malay community, Dabus is a sensory phenomenon imbued with implicit meaning. The interpretation of art and culture is inseparable from

its symbolic form, as the system of meanings provides an integrated cultural framework for the phenomenon being described (Santosa, 2000).

Dabus is constructed upon Islamic aesthetic principles to fulfil the sensory needs of Malay society, as outlined by Gazalba (1988, 1977). The ensuing diagram illustrates the correlation between Islamic aesthetics and Dabus performances:



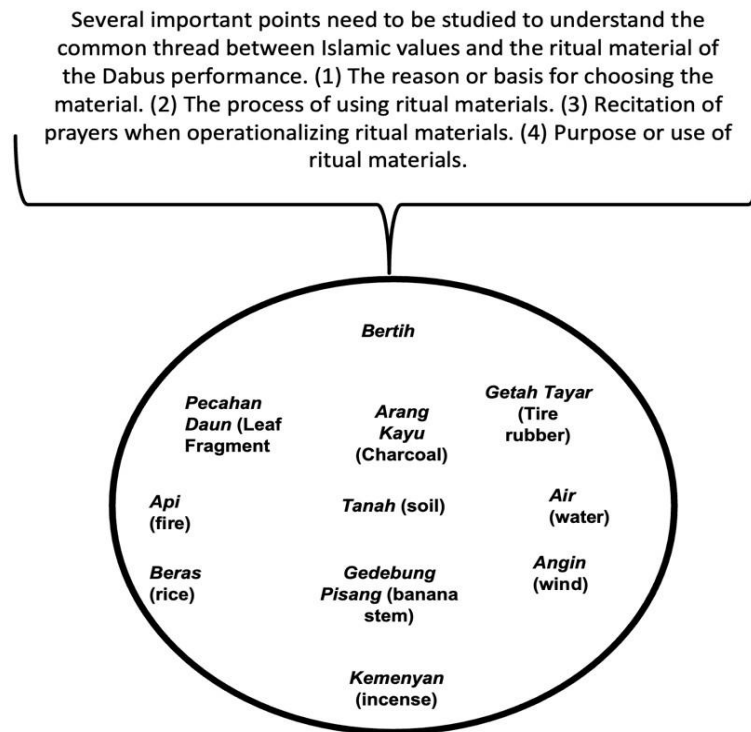
**Figure 7.** The meaning and value of Islam in Dabus performance, adapted from Gazalba (1988, 1977) and based on interviews with Mat Rosnan

The elements of good, nice, and correct in the aesthetics of Dabus performances are nonhierarchical. Together, they form a system that generates meaning, which can be understood through an interpretive framework. Each aspect of Islamic aesthetics that is considered good inherently encompasses elements of excellence and truth. Likewise, an element that is faithful inherently embodies the qualities of goodness and excellence within Islamic aesthetics. As an interconnected system, these elements are inseparable from one another.

In this regard, Rosnan asserts:

“Most people focus on the ritual materials I use, yet very few seek to understand in depth what these ingredients truly contain. They may appear ordinary, but for your information, I always begin with *Bismillah* whenever I use them. *Surah Al-Fatiha* is also an essential recitation. I silently recite appropriate prayers in my heart each time I utilise these materials.” (Mat Rosnan: Interview, April 13, 2022, October 15, 2022, July 17, 2023, in Tanjung Bidara, Perak).

As stated above, interpreting Dabus performances necessitates an understanding of the symbols inherent within Dabus itself. One such symbol is the musical instruments and ritual materials used in Dabus. The following diagram briefly explains the Islamic values and meanings associated with these ritual materials in Dabus performances.



**Figure 8.** The meaning and value of Islam in the ritual materials of the Dabus performance based on the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

As illustrated in (Figure 8), the ritual materials used in Dabus performances reflect a deep integration of Islamic values, particularly in relation to the concept of Tawhid or the oneness of God. Each material carries symbolic significance that aligns with the fundamental elements of creation and the natural order established by divine will. Earth (*tanah*), water (*air*), fire (*api*), and wind (*angin*) represent the classical elements, echoing the Quranic narrative of human creation from clay and the balance of nature governed by Allah. The inclusion of organic substances such as banana stem (*gedebung pisang*), leaf fragments (*pecahan daun*), and rice (*beras*) signifies sustenance and the cycle of life, reinforcing the idea that all provisions originate from God. The presence of charcoal (*arang kayu*) and incense (*kemenyan*) further suggests purification and transformation, reflecting spiritual refinement through trials and devotion.

These materials also hold intrinsic ritualistic meanings that correspond to Islamic spiritual practices. The burning of incense has long been associated with purification, aligning with the Islamic emphasis on both physical and spiritual cleanliness. Fire, often representing divine power, signifies both destruction and renewal, resonating with the Quranic imagery of divine judgment and mercy. Water, a crucial element in Islamic purification rites such as ablution, embodies spiritual cleansing and renewal. Wind, as an unseen yet powerful force, mirrors the metaphysical presence of divine guidance. The symbolic presence of rubber (*getah tayar*) within the ritual materials may indicate endurance and flexibility, qualities essential in the path of faith. The recitation of prayers while using these materials reinforces the necessity of divine remembrance, ensuring that the ritual remains an act of devotion rather than mere performance.

At a deeper level, the composition of these ritual materials affirms the unity of existence under divine sovereignty. The interconnectedness of natural elements within the ritual highlights the Islamic worldview, in which all creation submits to God's will and serves as a sign of His presence. This perspective aligns with Sufi thought, which often interprets natural phenomena as metaphors for spiritual states. In Dabus, these materials function as a medium of physical engagement and a manifestation of faith, linking bodily endurance with the soul's journey towards divine closeness. By invoking the name of God before engaging with these materials, practitioners affirm their reliance on divine authority, thereby integrating the practice of Dabus into the broader framework of Islamic devotion and submission.



**Figure 9.** Dabus offering ritual material, 2023

The ritual materials used in Dabus are selected based on their medicinal properties and an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the ingredients and their therapeutic functions. For instance, banana sap is known to reduce bleeding from wounds. Furthermore, throughout the process of preparing and utilising ritual materials in Dabus performances, the Dabus Khalifah is required to begin with an affirmation of monotheism, declaring that there is no God but Allah. Additionally, while handling these materials, the Dabus Khalifah must maintain constant remembrance of Allah. In other words, while the hands, feet, and other parts of the body are in motion, the heart remains steadfast in the remembrance of Allah. The prayers recited in Dabus rituals are derived from the Quran. Thus, the fundamental objectives of performing the Dabus ritual are the affirmation of monotheism towards Allah and the reinforcement of social bonds, particularly as one of its primary functions is healing.

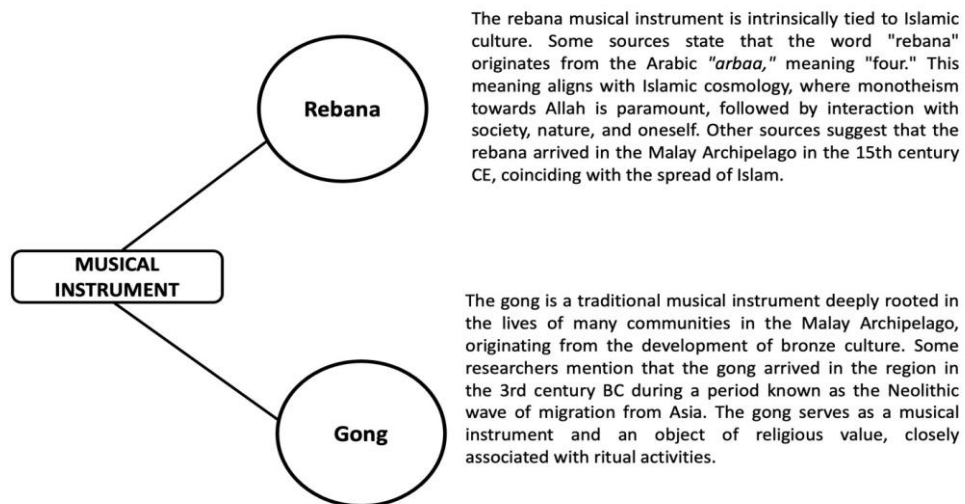




**Figure 10.** Variety of warrior stabs in the Dabus performance, 2023

Symbols encompass more significant concepts that can be interpreted as belief systems regarding the presence of the transcendent (Sumardjo, 2006). The symbol system is inseparable from the social system, including social structure, mobility, statehood, or any social behaviour that constantly changes due to internal or external forces. This means that interactions among cultural components can generate new symbolic forms (Kuntowijoyo, 1987). Additionally, cultural art conveys the values underlying human actions by accompanying the resulting image or outcome. Form and content are the primary functions of cultural art (Kartodirdjo, 1982). Three critical aspects of culture are mythology, ritual, and symbols (Fischer, 1994).

In this context, the musical instruments of *rebana* and *gong* musical instruments are always connected to the knowledge system of the Malay community. Therefore, these two musical instruments are integral to the Malay community's entire social and religious system, one expression of which is found in the Dabus ritual performance. The subsequent diagram illustrates the integration of Islamic values and meanings in the *rebana* and *gong* instruments used in Dabus performances.



**Figure 11.** The meaning and value of Islam in Dabus performance musical instruments based on the results of an interview with Mat Rosnan

The interplay of the *rebana* and *gong* musical instruments in Dabus performances can be seen as a fusion of Islam and local culture. If we refer to the origin of the *gong*, it first appeared as part of Malay culture. In the third century BC, the Bronze Age culture spread across much of the Indonesian archipelago. The extensive migration from mainland Asia is part of the Dong Son culture (Lindsay, 1992). The belief in ancestral spirits that used the gong as a means of communication existed since the formation of shamanistic beliefs in Siberia and Central Asia (Eliade, 1974). This way of life also spread to the Malay Peninsula as part of this extensive migration. As a monotheistic religion, Islam transformed Malay society in all aspects, including art (Zakaria, 2012). This means that Islamic influence, which reached the Malay Peninsulas, is strongly reflected in Malay art, with one symbol in the *rebana* music. Moreover, the combination of rebana and gong is also a form of adaptation and one-way interaction, where there is no conflict between the two in blending into the Dabus performance. In this same context, Rosnan stated:

"What I know is that these musical instruments have not been arbitrarily altered since ancient times because I understand they have a specific purpose. The rebana emphasizes that Dabus belongs to Islam, while the gong also reminds us that we have a local culture that has existed for a long time. Moreover, how we play the gong must follow the song's rhythm, whose source and content come from Islam." (Mat Rosnan: Interview April 13, 2022, October 15, 2022, July 17, 2023, in Tanjung Bidara, Perak).

The *rebana* is a musical instrument associated with praise songs, derived from the word "*solawat*," which can be interpreted as prayer or worship (Yunus, 1973). In terms of performance, there are three types: *rebana* and *solawat*, which aim to express love for the Prophet Muhammad; *rebana* and *qasidah berzanji*, which are widely used to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birth; and *rebana* and pop music, where the *rebana* has been adapted to contemporary conditions but remains within the context of disseminating Islamic values (Sinaga, 2001).



Figure 12. Dabus musical instruments, 2023

In accordance with the above statement, the Islamic values conveyed through Dabus performances are clearly exemplified in the subsequent lyrics:

*Budak-budak pergi ke sekolah  
Lagi mendapat lagi terpuji  
Cukup duit pergi ke Mekah  
Boleh berziarah ke makam nabi*

*(Source: Fatimah Seteh).*

(Translated version)  
Children going to school  
The more they learn, the more they are praised  
With enough money, go to Mecca  
To visit the Prophet's tomb

(Source: Fatimah Seteh)

These lyrics highlight several key points. The Malay understanding of Islam is also rapidly developing. This is because there is little conflict between Islam and existing Malay culture in the process of adaptation and interaction. This can be seen in the message conveyed, which pertains to Islamic values but utilizes Malay culture as a poem. In other words, Islamic values have become integral to the Malays' minds, hearts, and actions. Therefore, their expression of Islam is not solely through absolute Islamic law but also through *muamalat*, which can be developed in line with Malay culture. Through Dabus performances, it is evident that Malays can differentiate between obligatory laws and teachings that can be interpreted according to local cultural needs.

## 6. Conclusion

Appreciating, interpreting, understanding, and implementing Islamic values in Dabus performances cannot be achieved if approached in isolation. Instead, it must be examined comprehensively, in alignment with its underlying concepts and historical context. Observing a Dabus performance without considering its origins and early development in the Malay Peninsula risks misinterpretation. Such a fragmented approach may lead to biased judgments, potentially perceiving Dabus as contradictory to Islamic values.

The origins of Dabus are inherently linked to Islam, particularly within the framework of human interaction. In other words, Dabus emerged from within the Islamic tradition itself. Upon its arrival in the Malay Peninsula, this art form was readily embraced, becoming both a popular practice and a cherished tradition among the Malays. This is largely due to the fact that Dabus embodies Islamic principles, which the Malay society had already recognised, believed in, and practised.

The next crucial phase concerns the role of Dabus performances in shaping the cultural patterns and identity of the Malays within an Islamic framework. However, Dabus does not entirely reject Malay cultural elements. Rather, it represents a synthesis in which both Islamic and Malay cultural influences converge, thereby shaping Dabus into an art form that upholds the principles of both traditions.

Therefore, as envisioned in Dabus performances, the concept of Malay Islam denotes a moderate understanding of Islam, (*Ahli-Sunnah Waljamaah*), in which Islamic values are upheld while coexisting harmoniously with Malay cultural traditions. This is significant for two key reasons. First,

it fosters an aesthetic discourse that integrates Islamic principles with Malay artistic creativity. Second, it strengthens the foundation of Malay aesthetic expression, ensuring that Islam remains the primary reference and framework. This is particularly crucial given the increasing influence of Western ideologies on modern art in the Malay Peninsula, often at the expense of Islamic and Malay ethical values. In this context, Dabus, as a manifestation of Malay Islam, serves as a counterbalance, safeguarding Malay art and ensuring that it continues to reflect Malay society's cultural and spiritual ideals.

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