

HARMONISING TRADITION AND MODERNITY: THE EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *DIKIR BARAT* IN SINGAPORE

*(Mengharmonikan Tradisi dan Kemodenan: Evolusi dan Kepentingan
Budaya Dikir Barat di Singapura)*

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and cultural significance of *dikir barat* in Singapore, a traditional Malay choral performance art that has become a symbol of Malay cultural identity in the region. The *dikir barat*, which originated from the Pattani region, is now known as a significant cultural arts practice within the Malay community in Singapore. The art form of *dikir barat* serves as a form of entertainment and a medium for cultural expression. Through a qualitative research approach, including in-depth interviews and video transcriptions, this study traces the historical journey of *dikir barat*, exploring its transformation from a traditional practice to a modern-day symbol of cultural heritage in Singapore. The research highlights *dikir barat* as a form of cultural capital, symbolizing the collective memory, social norms, and intrinsic values of the Singapore Malay community. This paper also examines the adaptation of the art form to contemporary contexts, incorporating modern elements while preserving its traditional essence. This adaptation has allowed *dikir barat* to remain relevant and appealing to younger generations, ensuring its continuity amidst the modernising society of Singapore. The findings underscore the crucial role of *dikir barat* in fostering cultural continuity, social cohesion, and

a sense of identity within Singapore's Malay community. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications for cultural preservation, emphasizing the need for sustained efforts to maintain and promote *dikir barat* as a vibrant and integral part of Singapore's Malay heritage, capable of resonating with both current and future generations.

Keywords: *Dikir barat*, cultural capital, heritage, culture, traditional arts, Singapore

Abstrak

Makalah ini mengkaji evolusi dan kepentingan budaya dikir barat di Singapura, yang merupakan sebuah seni persembahan tradisional Melayu yang telah menjadi lambang identiti budaya Melayu di rantau ini. Berasal dari wilayah Pattani, dikir barat kini dikenali sebagai amalan kesenian budaya yang penting dalam masyarakat Melayu di Singapura. Seni dikir barat berfungsi sebagai hiburan dan juga sebagai wadah untuk penyebaran budaya. Melalui pendekatan penyelidikan kualitatif, termasuk wawancara mendalam dan transkripsi video, kajian ini menelusuri perjalanan sejarah dikir barat dengan meneroka transformasinya daripada amalan tradisional kepada simbol warisan budaya moden di Singapura. Penyelidikan ini menonjolkan dikir barat sebagai bentuk modal budaya, yang merangkumi memori kolektif, norma sosial dan nilai intrinsik kepada komuniti Melayu. Makalah ini mengkaji bagaimana seni ini telah diadaptasi dengan konteks kontemporari, menggabungkan elemen moden sambil mengekalkan inti pati tradisinya. Adaptasi ini telah membolehkan dikir barat untuk kekal relevan dan menarik kepada generasi muda, memastikan kesinambungannya dalam kalangan masyarakat Singapura yang pesat membangun. Dapatan kajian menekankan peranan penting dikir barat dalam memupuk kesinambungan budaya, perpaduan sosial dan identiti dalam masyarakat Melayu Singapura. Makalah ini merumuskan implikasi yang lebih luas untuk pemeliharaan budaya, menekankan keperluan untuk usaha berterusan dalam mengekalkan dan mempromosikan dikir barat sebagai sebahagian daripada warisan Melayu Singapura yang dinamik, penting serta mampu menarik perhatian generasi semasa dan generasi akan datang.

Kata kunci: Dikir barat, modal budaya, warisan, budaya, seni tradisi, Singapura

INTRODUCTION

Dikir barat, a captivating traditional Malay choral performance, stands as a testament to the rich cultural diversity of Southeast Asia. Originating from the Pattani region

(Raja Halid Raja Iskandar, 2011), this art form has traversed boundaries to embed itself in the cultural ethos of regions like Kelantan and, significantly, Singapore. Its rhythmic melodies and communal spirit are not just a source of entertainment but a medium for cultural heritage. Largely popular in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, *dikir barat* involves solo lines sung by a lead singer (*Tok Juara*) and responded to by a chorus of ten to fifteen singers (*awok-awok*) accompanied by an ensemble of musicians consisting of a pair of *rebana* frame drums, *maracas* or tambourine, a *canang* and *gong* (Matusky & Tan, 2017).

This paper explores the evolution of *dikir barat*, tracing its journey from a localized traditional practice to a celebrated symbol of cultural identity in modern Singapore. It aims to unravel the layers of history, performance, and meaning that comprise this captivating art form, offering a window into its continuing relevance. In exploring *dikir barat*, this paper navigates through various facets: its historical roots and developments, the elements of its performance style, and its adaptation to contemporary contexts. This exploration encompasses an analysis of its cultural significance, both as a traditional art form and as a modern representation of Malay heritage in Singapore.

By examining the rich diversity of *dikir barat*'s history, its distinct performance elements, and its modern-day adaptations, this paper seeks to demonstrate how *dikir barat* bridges past and present. It showcases the art form as a dynamic embodiment of Malay cultural identity, adapting yet preserving its essence within Singapore's multicultural landscape.

***Dikir Barat* as a Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital, a term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). These assets include education, intellect, style of speech, dress, or physical appearance, and they serve as a social relation within a cultural economy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. It plays a crucial role in cultural and social life, influencing the way individuals perceive and interact with their cultural environment and heritage.

Dikir barat, as an important element of culture, extends beyond performance art. It encapsulates a wealth of traditional knowledge, skills, and practices that are essential to the Malay cultural heritage. As a communal performance, *dikir barat* transcends more than entertainment, emerging as a dynamic and living repository

of Malay culture, language, and social values (Brennan, 2001). The melodic lyrics, harmonious melodies, and the collective spirit of its performances are more than just artistic expressions; they are mediums through which the rich diversity of Malay folklore, history, and social norms are conveyed and preserved.

In the context of the current modernising society of Singapore, *dikir barat* assumes a significant role within Malay society. It serves as a cultural anchor, offering a sense of belonging and continuity to the Malay community amidst the waves of change. The communal aspect of *dikir barat*, where group members perform concertedly in a harmonious display of unity and collaboration, reinforces social bonds, and strengthens communal identity. This aspect is particularly crucial in a multicultural and dynamic city-state like Singapore, where maintaining cultural identity as a minority group can be challenging.

Furthermore, *dikir barat* serves as an educational tool, especially for the younger generation of Malay children and youths. Through its engaging performances, it provides an accessible avenue to impart cultural values, historical narratives, and linguistic nuances. This form of cultural education is vital to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of one's heritage among the youth, ensuring that these traditions are not neglected and disregarded. As the use of the Malay language amongst Malay children is on the decline in Singapore,¹ the introduction of *dikir barat* during school activities encourages Malay children to learn the language beyond their classroom as an enjoyable performing arts activity.

Khan (2013) explored how modernization and the preservation of tradition interact within community-based arts, focusing on how marginalized artists, especially those who practice traditional forms like *dikir barat*, achieve recognition in mainstream cultural spaces. Arts organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating this process by helping artists adopt new competencies and literacies, such as learning to navigate arts funding systems and expanding their reach to broader audiences (Khan, 2013). Furthermore, while artists strive to preserve the authenticity of their cultural practices, they must also embrace modern methods of sharing and spreading the culture. Maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity is essential for preserving the relevance and vibrancy of *dikir barat* in Singapore.

The adaptability of *dikir barat* also underscores its resilience and continued relevance in contemporary society. While staying true to its traditional roots, *dikir barat* has shown a remarkable ability to evolve and incorporate modern elements, thus appealing to a broader and younger audience. Over time, the themes in *dikir barat* competitions have shifted, reflecting evolving societal concerns. In

the 1980s, the focus was on addressing community challenges like drug abuse. Meanwhile, in the 1990s, the focus was on environmental issues, notably climate change. More recently, the themes have pivoted to youth-related topics. For instance, in the 2023 inter-tertiary competition *Suara Serumpun*, the theme was “Dedicated Youths, Visionary Society” (Shawal Yusoff, 2023). This theme was selected to inspire students to explore and express their perspectives on the role of youth and their potential influence on shaping the future of society. Khan’s (2013) analysis emphasized the importance of adapting traditional practices while preserving cultural significance in the context of modern influences and changing cultural landscape.

Dikir barat serves both as a pivotal element of cultural capital for the Malay community in Singapore and a symbol of cultural resilience and adaptability. As this form of cultural art evolves to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society, cultural integrity, serving as both a symbol of heritage and a medium for contemporary expression, is retained (Raja Iskandar Raja Halid, 2016). It is not just a performance art; it is a vibrant, living bridge connecting the past, present, and future of the Malay community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Raja Iskandar Raja Halid (2016), in Malaysia, over time, *dikir barat* has undergone a process of “cleaning up” and modernization to be presented as a key component of Malaysia’s national cultural heritage. This transformation has involved formalizing the art form’s structure and style, aligning it with the broader objectives of national cultural policy. Despite these changes, *dikir barat* continues to be deeply rooted in the cultural identity of Kelantan, particularly through the continuous use of the Kelantanese dialect, which remains a central element in maintaining its authenticity (Raja Iskandar Raja Halid, 2016).

This duality – balancing modernization for national representation with the preservation of traditional identity – underscores the ongoing tension between cultural preservation and the need to adapt to the latest developments. However, the limited scope of the current research on specific geographical regions, particularly Kelantan in Malaysia, often overlooks the broader impact of *dikir barat* in other parts of Southeast Asia, including Singapore, hence limiting the understanding of its cultural significance in a wider and more contemporary context (Raja Iskandar Raja Halid, 2011).

The modernization of *dikir barat* through the incorporation of technology and modern musical elements has played a pivotal role in ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary society (Azlina Musa et al., 2021). By integrating genres such as rap, hip-hop, and techno into traditional performances, *dikir barat* has adeptly evolved to resonate with the changing preferences of younger audiences. This transformation highlights the art form's capacity to merge modernity with tradition, ensuring that it remains a valued cultural practice. Although most of the research on *dikir barat* has focused on ethnomusicological or anthropological perspectives, the interdisciplinary research approach undertaken by Azlina et al. (2021) offers a new perspective on how *dikir barat* has avoided obsolescence. This approach highlights its continued relevance in the cultural landscape and its ability to engage with a broader and more diverse audience. Indeed, the potential contributions of fields such as sociology, education, and media studies are significant in broadening the understanding of *dikir barat*'s role in modern society (Matusky & Tan, 2017).

The impact of *dikir barat* on its practitioners and participants is profound and deserves greater recognition. According to Mohd Fahmi Ismail et al. (2016), the ability of *dikir barat* to influence behaviour through its lyrics accentuates its role in upholding the importance of tradition and accommodating modern societal needs. However, the scarcity of longitudinal studies tracing the evolution of *dikir barat* over extended periods creates a gap in understanding how the art form has consistently balanced this dual role. While much research captures snapshots of *dikir barat* at specific points in time, few studies delve into its transformation and continuity in response to growing cultural dynamics. In the absence of comprehensive longitudinal data, the full extent of *dikir barat*'s adaptation across generations remains underexplored (Mohd Fahmi Ismail et al., 2016; Brennan, 2001).

Finally, the voices of Singaporean practitioners and participants in *dikir barat* are underrepresented in academic research. While there have been interviews and oral histories archived, there is a need for more participatory research methods that centre the experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in the art form. This would provide a more nuanced and authentic account of *dikir barat*'s significance within the Singaporean Malay community.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was grounded in qualitative analysis, drawing upon a diverse array of primary sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of *dikir barat* within the Singaporean context. In addition to an extensive review of the available literature on the subject, over five hours of interviews and videos featuring *dikir barat* performances and discussions with practitioners in Singapore were meticulously analysed. Furthermore, approximately three hours of the video recordings were transcribed verbatim. This transcription process allowed for an in-depth examination of the language, expressions, and sentiments of the *dikir barat* community, thereby capturing the essence of the art form as experienced and described by its practitioners. An interview with an individual regarded to be a pioneer of *dikir barat* in Singapore, Md Khir Md Zain, was also carried out to triangulate the data. This immersive approach provided nuanced insights into the evolution of *dikir barat* in Singapore. This hands-on method of data collection proved to be invaluable, as it facilitated a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of *dikir barat* and its role as a cultural mainstay in the Malay community.

The qualitative content analysis of the three hours of transcribed interviews was meticulously conducted using NVivo data analysis software. This advanced analysis facilitated an organised and detailed examination of the transcripts, allowing the author to methodically sift through the data. By employing NVivo's robust coding capabilities, the author was able to categorise the content into a hierarchical structure of themes and sub-themes, reflecting the multifaceted perspectives of the interviewees. A total of six (6) main nodes representing the overarching themes were identified. These were further broken down into 15 sub-nodes, with 30 descriptors providing a granular view of the responses.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The rigorous coding process enabled the concentration of a vast range of qualitative data into comprehensible and interpretable segments. As a result, the emergent themes accurately encapsulated the collective viewpoints and experiences related to *dikir barat*, as expressed by the participants across the three hours of interviews transcribed (See Table 1).

Table 1 Themes and most frequent descriptors arising from coding of transcribed interviews.

No.	Themes arising from coding	Most frequent descriptor	Number of times descriptor arose
1	Pioneers of <i>dikir barat</i> in Singapore	Cikgu Khir	20
		Wak Rani	17
		Zaharian Osman	15
		Hasrat	10
2	Pioneer <i>dikir barat</i> groups	Rajawali	18
		Alang Ikan Duyung	15
		Sri Teruna Jaya	15
		Kelana Purba	14
3	<i>Dikir barat</i> competitions	Gema <i>Dikir Barat</i>	11
		Perdana	11
		Mega Perdana	10
		Dendang Rakyat	10
		Kemuning	8
4	Development of <i>dikir barat</i>	Use of rebana	18
		Production of Dikir Temasek CD	14
5	Institutions of <i>dikir barat</i>	Gabungan <i>Dikir Barat</i>	19
		Nanyang Junior College	15
		Majlis Pusat	15
6	Personalities in <i>dikir barat</i>	Zaidy Nandir	10
		Qamar Baba	10
		Khairudin Samsudin	8

Pioneers of *Dikir Barat* in Singapore

The admiration for pioneers like Md Khir Md Zain, Wak Rani, Zaharian Osman, and Hasrat in the *dikir barat* community speaks volumes about their enduring impact. These individuals have not only contributed to the art form's richness but also played a pivotal role in its communication to future generations. Their

frequent mentions in the data underscore their status as cultural icons, embodying the spirit and tradition of *dikir barat* in Singapore. Md Khir Md Zain is attributed as the main person who brought *dikir barat* into the fore of the Singapore school scene, around the late 1970's. In the interview with him, Md Khir recalled how his *dikir barat* journey began:

“In 1977, I was a young Secondary 1 student in Victoria School who was eager to join the Malay Language activity group. At that time, boria (another type of choral singing incorporating dance) was more popular with competitions and cultural activities organised often. At the effort of increasing the repertoire of cultural performance arts in the school, a senior member of the group approached us to start the Dikir Barat group.” (Md Khir Md Zain, personal interview, 12 October 2023)

Through performances conducted by the Victoria School *dikir barat* group in other schools, interest in *dikir barat* began to grow, and even all-girls schools such as Crescent Girls and Tanjong Katong Girls School began to open up their *dikir barat* groups. By 1984, students from the Malay Language, Literature and Drama Society (MLLDS) in Nanyang Junior College, together with their teacher-in-charge, Naemah Hamid, organized the first inter-school national *dikir barat* competition called *Gema*, which received tremendous support across schools in Singapore (Genbano, 2021).

In the 1980s, aside from schools, community clubs were also amassing large numbers of youths who were keen on *dikir barat*. Another pioneer, a former policeman, Md Rani Haji Amin, affectionately known as *Wak Rani* (*Wak* meaning older brother in Javanese), is frequently mentioned as an important individual who led the formation of one of the first *dikir barat* group based outside of school, in 1983. Based in Jurong Police Boys Club, where he was stationed, the group was named *Sri Teruna Jaya* (translated to mean The Successful Young Men). *Wak Rani* was driven by his vision of involving young Malay youths in the Jurong area in meaningful activities to keep them safe and away from vice. His vision came true, and *Sri Teruna Jaya* went on to become one of the most prolific *dikir barat* groups in Singapore (Kelana Purba, 2020).

In 1989, Zaharian Osman, a prominent music producer and *Berita Harian* journalist, alongside *Wak Rani*, Md Khir, and Md Hasrat Yaacob, a fellow *dikir barat* enthusiast from Victoria School, initiated the concept of a National *Dikir barat* competition in Singapore (Kelana Purba, 2020). Zaharian, known for his visionary ideas and writing prowess, recognized *dikir barat*'s potential to engage Singapore's Malay youth. The inaugural National *Dikir barat* competition in 1990,

led by Majlis Pusat, paved the way for the establishment of the Singapore *Dikir barat* Foundation (Gabungan *Dikir barat* Singapura) on January 16, 1992, aimed at formalising structures and standards for the growing number of *Dikir barat* groups across Singapore.

Influential *Dikir Barat* Groups

The prominence of *Dikir barat* groups such as Rajawali, Alang Ikan Duyung, Sri Teruna Jaya, and Kelana Purba highlights the collective efforts in sustaining and popularising *dikir barat*. These groups, through their performances and teachings, have become custodians of the art, ensuring its vibrancy and continued appeal across different age groups in the Malay community.

Under the leadership of Md Khir, Rajawali emerged as a pioneering *dikir barat* group in Singapore, notable for presenting performances that closely mirrored the traditional style originating from Kelantan, particularly with their use of the authentic *Dikir barat* drum, the *rebana*.

“The formation of the group, Rajawali, came about from a request from a friend to teach the Alumni of Changkat Changi secondary school. They wanted to present a cultural performance for their annual Hari Raya concert. This close acquaintance knew about my involvement with the art of Dikir Barat during my school days and requested that I teach them. We went around to look for a suitable place to train and found Kampung Ubi community centre being most accommodating. The name Rajawali was decided as it was a prominent name featured in one of the songs we performed; a bird that flew high with joy and pride bringing positive thoughts to all those below and this echoed with our own sentiments at that time.” (Md Khir Md Zain, personal interview, 12 October 2023)

In 1990, the group Alang Ikan Duyung, under Hamid Osman’s leadership, triumphed in the inaugural National *Dikir barat* Competition, earning accolades for Best Lyrics, Best *Tukang Karut*, and as Overall Champions (Hamid Osman, 2020). Renowned for their innovative approach, notably the incorporation of blues rhythms in their performances, the group included notable personalities like Suhaimi Yusof, a celebrated local Singaporean artist and comedian who played percussion (Kelana Purba, 2020). Alang Ikan Duyung were pioneers in recording *dikir barat* songs on cassette for commercial distribution. Collaborating with Sri Teruna Jaya, another influential group, they produced the ground-breaking album – “*Dikir Nusantara*” in 1991, with production led by Zaharian Osman (Rif Film, 2022b).

Coming in second place after Alang Ikan Duyung was Wak Rani's Sri Teruna Jaya, often referred to by their acronym STJ. Their fame grew throughout the 1990s, marked by frequent invitations to perform at events organised by the Singapore Police Force. There was a memorable instance when Zaharian Osman had to implement disciplinary measures with the members of STJ:

“STJ had a reputation for being *kumpulan budak nakal* (naughty group of boys). During Perdana 1990, we saw them come to the competition, wearing gold necklaces! They walked about so confidently! I told them to take off their necklaces or leave. They took it off. From then onwards, they actually became a very disciplined group!” (Kelana Purba, 2020)

Another influential *dikir barat* group that continues to flourish to date is Kelana Purba. Established in 1990, the group commenced as a combined group of boys from Bedok View Secondary School and Tanjong Katong Technical Secondary School. Kelana Purba is known for introducing and infusing new elements into *dikir barat* performances, especially their sharp hand movements and theatrical overall performances, which had literary influences due to the presence of talents such as Zaidy Nandir, who was not only a well-respected Malay language teacher but also a prolific lyricist, known to many as one of the best *dikir barat* lyrics writer in Singapore.

***Dikir Barat* Competitions: A Platform for Talent and Tradition**

Competitions like Gema *Dikir barat*, Perdana, Mega Perdana, Dendang Rakyat, and Kemuning serve as vital platforms for showcasing talent and fostering a competitive yet communal spirit. They not only highlight the skill and creativity within the *dikir barat* community but also play a crucial role in keeping the art form dynamic and evolving.

In the 1990s, these competitions flourished, showcasing a rich diversity of themes and genres that captivated audiences across the island. These competitions provided a platform for various groups to display their artistic competence, and the differing styles reflected a dynamic cultural scene. The competitions ranged from highly traditional formats to modern and contemporary expressions, each bringing its unique flavour to the stage. This diversity in genres facilitated the flow of creativity, thereby attracting more youths to participate in whichever capacity they preferred.

A significant milestone in the structuralisation of *dikir barat* in Singapore was the introduction of the Perdana Competition in March 1990, during the Malay Cultural Month. This national competition played a crucial role in formalising *dikir barat*, setting a high standard for the quality of performances and the rigour of judging. The Mega Perdana competition established comprehensive rules and regulations that became the benchmark for subsequent *dikir barat* competitions. By institutionalising these standards, Mega Perdana laid the foundation for modern *dikir barat* competitions in Singapore, contributing to the professionalization of the art form and ensuring a consistent level of excellence in performances.

One notable example of a modern evolution of *dikir barat* competitions was the Kemuning *dikir barat* competitions, which embraced contemporary genres. In these competitions, groups were permitted to incorporate instruments beyond the traditional *dikir barat* ones, leading to a fusion of sounds that included angklung, *hadrah*, Indian drums, and other modern instruments. This freedom extended to the movements and songs, allowing participants to push the boundaries of creativity and innovation. The result was a vibrant and eclectic mix of performances that breathed new life into the traditional art form, attracting a wider audience and encouraging a new generation of performers. The flexibility and inclusivity of these competitions provided a creative outlet for many youths, who could express themselves in new and innovative ways.

Conversely, competitions such as the Ayer Rajah Competition adhered strictly to traditional or “asli” standards. These events emphasised the importance of preserving the raw, authentic essence of *dikir barat*. Groups participating in these competitions were required to ensure that their performances remained faithful to the traditional limits, both in terms of musicality and choreography. The focus was on celebrating the traditional elements of *dikir barat*, with songs and movements that honoured the art form’s historical roots. This approach ensured that the cultural heritage of *dikir barat* was maintained and respected, providing a counterbalance to the more modern interpretations seen in other competitions. The existence of such traditional competitions also allowed youths with a passion for cultural preservation to engage deeply with their heritage, fostering a sense of pride and continuity.

Overall, the variety of genres in *dikir barat* competitions significantly enhanced the cultural landscape. It allowed for a broad spectrum of participation, enabling more youths to engage with *dikir barat* in ways that resonated with them. Whether they were drawn to the innovative, modern expressions or the pure, traditional forms, there was a space for everyone. This inclusivity not only sustained the tradition of *dikir barat* but also ensured its relevance and appeal to younger generations, fostering a vibrant and sustainable cultural practice.

Dynamic Development of *Dikir Barat*

The dynamic development of *dikir barat* is evident through innovations such as the transition to the use of the *rebana* as a percussion instrument and the production of recordings of local *dikir barat* songs, such as the Dikir Temasek CD.

The first *rebana* found its way to Singapore from Kelantan to Johor Bahru via bus in 1989. According to Md Khir:

“In 1989, I was working in a concrete pile production plant in Kranji, when I heard *dikir barat* songs being sung in the workers’ quarters within the compound of the plant and was curious to find out where it came from. A group of Kelantanese workers were singing *dikir barat* songs during their break time. I approached the small container store and discovered they were seated and singing in unison. During that time, they revealed that they would be doing it as a favourite pastime to chase away the stress and hardship they felt. One of the workers, Mat Noh said that they would use genuine percussion instruments if they were in Kelantan as he would be the percussion player there. So, I proceeded to make arrangements to purchase a set of instruments. The *rebana* set was sent to Johor Bahru via Express bus. Mat Noh was the one who arranged the delivery, and I collected them from the bus interchange with him. In the coming weeks, I invited Mat Noh to teach me to play the *rebana*.” (Md Khir Md Zain, personal interview, 12 October 2023)

After Md Khir’s group, Rajawali, first performed using the *rebana*, Md Khir himself shared his knowledge of the use and techniques of playing the *rebana* with other groups who were keen to advance their knowledge of the authentic *dikir barat* musical instruments. In the 1990s, all groups then transitioned from using the smaller musical drums known as the *kompang* to using the *rebana*. Through common workshops and clinics, *dikir barat* musicians established common *rebana* rhythm patterns and standard melodies within a *dikir barat* performance (Kelana Purba, 2020). Some groups, such as Kelana Purba, even established their direct contact with the Kelantanese themselves, going beyond purchasing instruments to deepening their knowledge of the original performing art with *dikir barat* activists in Kelantan (Rif Film, 2022a).

While the “Dikir Temasek” CD album produced in 1994 was frequently mentioned by interviewees as a landmark production that proved the massive interest of *dikir barat* fans in Singapore during its height, it was the album “Dikir Nusantara” produced in 1991 by Zaharian Osman in cassette form by the groups Alang Ikan Duyung and Sri Teruna Jaya that made history as the first *dikir barat* album ever produced in Singapore. The tape titled “Asyik!”, meaning captivating,

featured songs from both these groups who were the top two groups from the first Perdana Competition.²

The shift to singing songs in standard Malay language for the first-ever *dikir barat* cassette tape recording, instead of the traditional Kelantanese dialect, represents a significant development in the area of language. This change marked the institutionalisation of *dikir barat* in Singapore, aligning the performances with the linguistic practices of Malays in Singapore. This adaptation not only made *dikir barat* more accessible to the local audience but also underscored the evolving nature of cultural expressions within the community. It reflects the *dikir barat* community's willingness to innovate within the tradition, ensuring the art form remains relevant and appealing in modern times.

Institutions and Their Role in Sustaining *Dikir Barat*

Institutions like Gabungan *Dikir barat*, Nanyang Junior College, and Majlis Pusat are instrumental in institutionalising *dikir barat*, providing structured learning and preservation of this cultural practice. Their involvement underscores the importance of formal support in sustaining and promoting *dikir barat* as a vital component of Malay heritage.

Gabungan *Dikir barat*, established in 1992, has been instrumental in unifying various *dikir barat* groups under one federation, promoting discipline and high standards within the community. This organisation emerged to address issues of rivalry and lack of coordination among groups, fostering a structured environment that emphasised the artistic and cultural integrity of *dikir barat*. By organising workshops and clinics, Gabungan *Dikir barat* ensured that new groups received proper guidance, fostering a professional approach to the practice and performance of *dikir barat*. This formal support was crucial in maintaining the art form's sustainability and encouraging creativity while preserving its traditional elements. The formation of Gabungan highlighted the need for a structured and disciplined approach, setting a benchmark for the quality of performances and the conduct of groups, which significantly contributed to the art form's evolution and professionalization in Singapore.

Nanyang Junior College (NYJC) played a pivotal role in the formal education and promotion of *dikir barat*. The introduction of the Gema *Dikir barat* Competition around 1979 to 1980 at NYJC marked the beginning of organised *dikir barat* competitions in schools. With the support of Mr. Chia Khoo Hock, the principal of NYJC, and the efforts of dedicated teachers like Naemah Hamid, *dikir barat* flourished in the educational environment. NYJC's annual Gema *Dikir barat*

Competition became a cornerstone event, setting standards for performance quality and thematic content. This initiative not only enhanced the student's proficiency in the Malay language but also instilled a deep appreciation for their cultural heritage. The structured approach adopted by NYJC, including the requirement for poetic formal Malay language in lyrics, significantly contributed to the popularity and cultural relevance of *dikir barat* among the youth. The role of NYJC was crucial in institutionalising *dikir barat* within the academic setting, providing a model for other schools and fostering a new generation of performers who were well-versed in both traditional and contemporary aspects of the art form.

Majlis Pusat's involvement underscored the importance of formal institutional support in promoting *dikir barat* as a vital component of Malay heritage. The organisation of the first national *dikir barat* competition by Majlis Pusat in 1990 and subsequent collaborations with Gabungan *Dikir barat* highlighted their commitment to elevating the status of *dikir barat*. Majlis Pusat played a crucial role in coordinating national competitions and providing a platform for groups to showcase their talents on a larger scale. These competitions, characterised by stringent judging criteria and high standards, helped institutionalise *dikir barat*, ensuring its sustainability and growth. The structured and professional approach promoted by Majlis Pusat laid the foundation for future developments in *dikir barat*, preserving its cultural essence while encouraging innovation and creativity. This formalization was pivotal in setting a benchmark for performance quality and regulatory standards, ensuring that *dikir barat* remained a vibrant and respected cultural performance in Singapore.

Personalities Shaping the Future of *Dikir Barat* in Singapore

Figures such as Zaidy Nandir, Qamar Baba, and Khairudin Samsudin were frequently mentioned by interviewees as playing pivotal roles in the development and promotion of *dikir barat* in Singapore.

Zaidy Nandir is remembered for his serious and thoughtful contributions to *dikir barat*, particularly through his lyrics writing. His work ensured that the performances maintained high artistic standards and cultural relevance. Zaidy's ability to craft lyrics that were both deep and accessible helped elevate the quality of performances. His involvement as a judge in national competitions helped institutionalise rigorous standards, making sure that *dikir barat* performances were both entertaining and educational.

Qamar Baba, a percussionist who joined Sri Teruna Jaya (STJ) in 1983 at the age of 13, exemplifies youth dedication and passion for *dikir barat*. He was

introduced to *dikir barat* through the Jurong Police Boys Club and was mentored by Wak Rani. Through his admission and interviews with his mentor, Qamar acknowledged that it was hours of relentless practice and self-learning, initially through cassette recordings, that led him to become a proficient *tukang karut* and *rebana* player (Rif Film, 2022b). His commitment to mastering the art form without formal instruction underscores the organic and grassroots development of *dikir barat* in Singapore.

The participation of popular personalities like Khairudin Samsudin in *dikir barat* significantly contributed to the art form's appeal and relevance among the youth. As a local celebrity, host, and media personality within the Malay community in Singapore, Khairudin's involvement as the *Tukang Karut*, or one of the main singers for the group Hikayat Putera Emas, played a crucial role in drawing attention to *dikir barat*. His popularity extended to appearances in mainstream media, including the first McDonald's advertisement when McDonald's turned halal in Singapore.³ This visibility not only heightened his profile but also attracted a younger audience to *dikir barat*, leveraging his influence to foster interest in this cultural practice. Moreover, McDonald's decision to use *dikir barat* as a means of advertising when they announced their transition to halal offerings in Singapore speaks volumes about the cultural significance and mainstream acceptance of *dikir barat*. This major choice by a prominent advertiser underscores the art form's potential to connect deeply with the community, serving as a vibrant expression of cultural identity. The inclusion of *dikir barat* in such a significant advertisement campaign not only boosted the visibility of the art form but also marked a moment of recognition and validation for *dikir barat* practitioners and the Malay community at large. This strategic incorporation illustrates how cultural traditions can be effectively integrated into modern marketing campaigns, enhancing their relevance, and ensuring their continuity.

***Dikir Barat* as Cultural Capital in the Malay Community in Singapore**

The resilience of local cultural traditions in the face of globalisation often hinges on how these traditions are recognised and nurtured within national frameworks. Chong (2006) argues that globalisation does not inevitably erode local cultural traditions like Chinese opera in Singapore. Instead, it fosters a complex interplay where the survival and vitality of such traditions depend largely on how they are supported and valued by national policies. This dynamic is also evident in *dikir barat*, which has evolved not only as a form of cultural capital within the Malay community but also as part of Singapore's national heritage, negotiating the influences of modernisation. Similarly, Bharatanatyam, brought to Singapore by pioneers from India and Sri

Lanka, became a significant cultural asset for the Indian community, embodying both tradition and identity. Institutions such as SIFAS and Bhaskar's Arts Academy institutionalised its practice, making it accessible to a wide range of students and promoting it as a unifying force through events like the Singapore Youth Festival (Elangovan, 2021). In the same way, *dikir barat* serves as a cultural unifier within the Malay community, with organisations like the Dikir Barat Federation formalising competitions and performances, enhancing participation, and reinforcing cultural ties across generations.

Dikir barat in Singapore has transcended performance art to become a vital cultural capital – a social currency that embodies the skills, knowledge, and experiences intrinsic to the Malay community. This unique cultural capital, deeply rooted in the Malay heritage, is not just a collection of songs and rhythms; it is a rich collection of communal memory and identity, a repository of shared cultural values and historical continuity.

The significance of *dikir barat* in the Malay community is evident in the way performers and followers connect with the art form. Mastery of *dikir barat* extends beyond musicality and lyrical proficiency; it encompasses an intuitive understanding of rhythm, an emotional connection to the songs, and an instinctive grasp of the cultural nuances embedded in each performance. This embodied cultural capital is profoundly personal and developed over time, reflecting a communal identity nurtured through generations.

Dikir barat also manifests as objectified cultural capital, evidenced by tangible items like recordings, musical instruments, and literature. These items hold more than monetary value; they symbolise the cultural richness of the Malay community, serving as physical embodiments of a living, breathing culture. The production of the album “Dikir Nusantara” in 1991 – the first *dikir barat* album in Singapore, is a testament to this, marking a historical moment of cultural preservation and dissemination.

Furthermore, *dikir barat* has gained institutionalised cultural capital, reflected in its recognition by formal institutions and its incorporation into educational frameworks. The art form is celebrated at national and international festivals, and there is a push for more formal recognition and support through grants and funding. In 2023, *dikir barat* was even included as part of the Singapore Writers' Festival, a premier literary event in Asia, where literary talents were invited to share in panel discussions, workshops, and performances with a worldwide audience. Young *dikir barat* talents such as Mudzaffar Syah (from Kelana Purba), Nurfaizal Ja'afar (from Makyong Kedek) and Firdaus Fid Faisal (from Andika Kencana) took to the stage and presented a workshop on *dikir barat* lyrics writing entitled *Dikir Jam* to a full

Arts House crowd.⁴ This institutionalisation is crucial for the continued evolution and preservation of *dikir barat*, ensuring that it remains a vibrant and integral part of the Malay cultural heritage in Singapore and beyond.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the interviews using NVivo revealed that *dikir barat* is not merely a cultural performance but a significant form of cultural capital within Singapore's Malay community. The findings highlight several key dimensions through which *dikir barat* contributes to the social and cultural wealth of this community.

Firstly, *dikir barat* serves as an embodied form of cultural capital, deeply interwoven into the social fabric of its participants, providing them with a strong sense of identity and belonging. The intuitive grasp of its rhythm and the emotional resonance of its lyrics reflect both its personal significance and its communal importance. *Dikir barat* not only preserves tradition but also adapts to the needs of modern society, with its lyrics influencing social behaviour and fostering community cohesion (Mohd Fahmi Ismail et al., 2016). This art form evolves through generations, transmitting knowledge, and values that enhance both individual and collective cultural competence. Additionally, *dikir barat* has absorbed elements of foreign culture, such as Western musical influences like pop and rock, integrating them into its local expression through innovative *dikir barat* songs and rhythms. This blend of tradition and modernity establishes *dikir barat* as an embodied form of cultural capital, where the incorporation of foreign influences strengthens its relevance in Singapore's evolving cultural landscape.

Secondly, the interviews underscored *dikir barat* as objectified cultural capital. The physical manifestations of the art, such as recordings, instruments, and merchandise, are cherished not only for their aesthetic and entertainment value but also as symbols of cultural legacy. Such items serve as tangible evidence of the community's dedication to preserving and celebrating its heritage. For *dikir barat* and other intangible cultural heritage to be sustainably preserved, they must become economically viable for the communities that practice them. The transformation of cultural heritage into a marketable commodity through performances, merchandise sales, and tourism ensures its continuation while adapting to the preferences of new audiences (Olalere, 2019).

Thirdly, the research findings point to *dikir barat*'s status as institutionalised cultural capital. The art form has garnered recognition and support from formal institutions, evidenced by national awards, government endorsements, and inclusion in educational curricula. This institutional backing legitimises *dikir barat*'s role in

the national narrative and further elevates its status as a significant cultural asset of Singapore. Such transformation certainly involves formalising aspects of the art form's structure and style to align it with the broader objectives of national cultural policy (Raja Iskandar Raja Halid, 2016).

However, the findings also point to challenges in the transmission of this cultural capital, such as the need for broader recognition and engagement beyond the Malay community. Participants expressed a desire for increased support to ensure the art form's sustainability and relevance for future generations. The data suggests that while *dikir barat* is firmly established as a form of cultural capital within the Malay community in Singapore, its full potential is yet to be realized on a wider national and international stage. In line with findings from Khan's (2013) study, it is important for practitioners of *dikir barat* in Singapore to enter mainstream cultural spaces where their art form can gain legitimacy and wider recognition. While opportunities for *dikir barat* to engage with these spaces are increasing, there is still a need for more intentional and structured efforts to provide practitioners with platforms that highlight the cultural and artistic value of their performances. Expanding such opportunities will ensure that *dikir barat* continues to thrive as a cultural capital and be appreciated within broader cultural and educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research conducted affirms unequivocally that *dikir barat* is an indispensable cultural capital within Singapore's Malay community. This art form embodies a rich repository of collective memory, social norms, and cultural expressions, making it a significant contributor to the community's identity and social cohesion. The meticulous analysis of interview transcripts underscores *dikir barat*'s multifaceted role – as embodied, objectified, and institutionalised cultural capital – each aspect contributing uniquely to its enduring legacy.

Remarkably, despite the passage of time and the challenges of a rapidly modernising society, *dikir barat* has demonstrated remarkable resilience. It continues to resonate with the younger generations, who not only embrace it but also actively participate in its perpetuation and evolution. This ongoing engagement is a testament to *dikir barat*'s adaptability and its deep-rooted significance within the fabric of Malay culture in Singapore.

Looking ahead, there is a palpable sense of optimism surrounding *dikir barat* in Singapore. It is a beacon of cultural resilience, inspiring hope that traditional arts will not only survive but also thrive in contemporary contexts. The enthusiasm and dedication displayed by the youth signal a bright future for *dikir barat*, ensuring that it will remain a cherished cultural asset for generations to come. As *dikir barat*

continues to garner support and recognition, both within and beyond Singapore, it stands poised to further cement its role as an invaluable cultural capital, fostering unity, pride, and a deeper appreciation of Malay heritage in the global cultural landscape.

NOTES

1. According to the Ministry of Education, the percentage of 12-year-old students speaking mostly Malay with their peers fell to 40 % in 2021, half of what it was a decade ago. Source: Lee, C., Mathew, R., & Koh, F. (2023, November 14). Manpower shortages, lack of use: Mother Tongue educators face challenges amid declining proficiency. *Channel NewsAsia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/mother-tongue-second-language-malay-mandarin-tamil-3919441>
2. National Library Board. (1991, March 7). *Kampung rap now on tape* <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/newpaper19910307-1.2.9.3>
3. See “McD Turns Halal Ad in the 90s” on Khairudin Samsudin YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH4vERUU6yM>
4. See <https://singaporewritersfestival.com/archives/programmes-2023/programme-details-2023/performance-music/dikir-jam-performance>

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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