

**Sub-Regional Experts Meeting in Asia on Intangible Cultural Heritage:
Safeguarding and Inventory-Making Methodologies
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***SYAIR PERLEMBAGAAN BRUNEI (BRUNEI CONSTITUTION POEM)
WRITTEN BY THE LATE SULTAN HAJI OMAR ALI SAIFUDDIEN
SA'ADUL KHAIRI WADDIEN: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION***

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1. Introduction

Syair, adapted from the Arabic word is a kind song that is sung in verses to narrate tales of writing with rhymes. According to Marsden (1812)¹, *syair* is also named *madah* or *nazam* or poetry, normally lengthy and the meaning or tone is mostly serious. In other words, it is a form of poetry which shows the capability of written poem to create continuous ideas instead of one flow of idea only. These ideas become a story, history, elements of advices, entertainment and others.

Among the Malay community including the local communities, it is just not only for entertainment but also as a tool of communication to deliver feelings, messages and calls from one person to another person or from one group to another group of community or to the community as a whole. *Syair* can tell about an incident, situation or express humanly feelings or a story which is real and more economical (Haji Abd Hamid Jaludin 1992:33) while Rosli HA (1989) clarified that *syair* is an effective delivery media in the form of suggestions, example, hinting and entertainment.

Syair has a variety of rhymes; normally contain the same alphabet at the end of the verses or lines for example 'aaa', 'nnn' and others. Every syllable in each verse totaled to 9 and 10 syllables and sometimes can be 11 and 12 syllables (Ensiklopedia, Malaysia). Most of the *syair* consist of four lines or verses, each verse cannot stand on its own. In every verse there is interest on its name and certain verse is added without any particular meaning.

The *syair* is only a small part of the whole story or a particular story. Although *syair* is almost similar to *pantun* with rhymes at the end of every verse, it is different in some aspects in term of use of number of words in every verse of *syair* composed of four words and between eight and twelve syllables. Beside that at the end of every verse of a *syair* possess similar rhymes at different lines in the verses and in the form of a,a,a,a, or b,b,b,b,a,a,n,n, and others.

2. Syair in Negara Brunei Darussalam

To determine exactly the early history of *syair* writing in Brunei is difficult. Haji Abd Hamid Jaludin (1992:32) claimed that the writing of local *syair* started around 17th to 18th century².

¹ See Ensiklopedia Malaysiana 12 sikh-tem pg 372-375

² See Haji Abdul Hamid Jaludin, Poem Manuscript –Poem Writing Competition Enconjunction With Silver Jubilee of His Majesty The Sultan of Negara Brunei Darussalam's Coronation, Bahana, Language and Literature Bureau;1992

Many *syair* were written during the century but there were only three popular *syair* that got the attention among the local community:

- *Syair Awang Semaun* by Pehin Siraja Khatib Abdul Razak bin Hassanmuddin,
- *Syair Rakis* by Pengiran Shabbandar Mohammad Salleh, and
- *Syair Perlembagaan* by the Late Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien (ibid, Haji Abd Hamid Jaludin 1992).

In Brunei, *syair* is one of genre of the traditional Malay poem and entertainment very much liked and flourishing in the life of local community, especially the Brunei Malays who reside in Water Village. During its glittering era, *syair* sung by Brunei Malays were very touching using tone and intonation that could attract the attention of the community at that time, especially the listeners for delivering the intention or message of a *syair* with effectiveness. Moreover, the *syair* reader who could perform his *syair* effectively with a melodious voice was able to charm girls to fall in love with him. Normally *syair* is read like singing and it is commonly performed during marriage ceremonies, for mutual entertainment and others.

There are some rhythms or tunes which always used by *syair* reader such as *Irama Syair Tambang*, *Irama Siti Zubaidah*, *Irama Tambang Beranyut*, *Irama Tambang Begawan*, *Irama Separas*, *Irama Dendang Beradu*, *Irama Ungai Lanjar*, *Irama Gerungai*, *Irama Alai Ranyut*, *Irama Paras Berungai Lanjar* and *Irama Unggai Singkat*. These produced attractive rhythms and tunes and very much liked is *lagu syair tambang* because rhythms rumble softly and can be infatuating.

Among the local *syair* enthusiasts still exist today are Awang Haji Abd Hamid Hj Md Ya'akub, Awang Ali Nordin Bin Mohd Zain, Dayang Asiah bte Begawan Pehin Hj A. Sirat, Dayang Siti Sahara binti Haji Ahmad and Awang Haji Emran bin Haji Abdul Aji. They are always invited for the *majlis menambang syair*, workshop and others.

3. *Syair Perlembagaan Negeri Brunei* (Negeri Brunei Constitution Poem)

Although the *syair* written by His Late Majesty only stating the purpose and the way the constitutional discussion carried out with the British Government, His Majesty's prudence action and handling the negotiation till successful portrayed his quality and excellence as a leader of a nation who possessed high quality of policies and diplomacy. In other words, the *syair* portrays the **Incident** as is an important moment during His rule; a starting point for Brunei self government and a strong basis towards achieving full independence and sovereignty.

There are many attractive and special descriptions that can be read and learned by the local community; for example, the description about His majesty's care for the welfare of his subjects and people of Brunei Darussalam to be always in harmony and peaceful, free from sufferings and misery.

*Perlembagaan Brunei nama ditara,
Setelah dicadang untuk Negara,
Untuk kebajikan rakyat sugara,
Memperbaiki nasib derita sengsara
(Syair Perlembagaan Negara Brunei page 2)*

To achieve His desire and aspiration for a Constitution to improve the life of His *rakyat* and the Country proclaimed in 1953, a committee was appointed for the purpose to meet with the people throughout the country to survey and provide a report on the opinion and desire of the *rakyat* to be included in the constitution.

*Sebelum diambil langkah muktamat,
Dilantik komiti memberi maklumat,
Pergi ke daerah ketemu rakyat,
Mencari fikiran suara muktamat
(Syair Perlembagaan Negara Brunei page 16)*

In the *syair*, His Majesty emphasized the importance of learning and education of the people as the production of knowledgeable people are very useful to lead and developing Negara Brunei Darussalam. Therefore planning and progress of local students need to be upgraded to make the education and knowledge of the *rakyat* and people of the country equivalent with the developed and developing nations.

*Ilmu itu pelita hati,
Dapat mengira untung dan rugi,
Senang menduga saudara sehati,
Panduan memilih elok dan keji
(Syair perlembagaan Negara Brunei page 50)*

Beside that, there was also written about the negotiation of Brunei and British Government represented by His Excellency Sir Anthony Abell, Governor of Sarawak who at that time was the **British High Commissioner** to Brunei; the differences of view and opinion between Brunei and the British which lead to some changes or amendment on the constitution draft; also narrated His Majesty's and delegates' trip to London to negotiate the subjects in a positive and goodwill environment. Finally the proposed and discussed drafts were agreed. This is the most resplendent achievement for Brunei under the leadership of His Majesty.

4. Challenges and Future of Syair in Brunei

Like other genre of proletariat literature, *syair* experienced the same fate as nowadays it is less and less practiced. Only a small portion of community still practices the *syair* but the numbers are too little. If this trend continues, the *syair* may only become history. There are some factors that influence the survival of the *syair*.

4.1 Environment and social challenges

The first factor is the environment and changes in way of life of the community especially in the development and progress of entertainment world more widespread and sophisticated. Nowadays, the community has many choices of entertainment such as pop music, karaoke, visiting entertainment centre, playing electronic musical instruments and others compare to the traditional community that is not exposed to the new culture. This situation, to a certain extent has successfully distance the local community and the world in general from traditional values including *syair*.

4.2 Old and Young Generation

Shortage of *syair* practitioners among the older generation and their small in numbers contributed to the loss of traditional heritage. Normally this minority is unable to control over the majority, moreover many of the older generation do not know how to perform or practice the *syair*. Nowadays it is rare to see the older generation practicing *syair* during leisure and at marriage ceremonies. The younger generation is more interested modern form of entertainment which is more enjoyable. The result from no transfer of the heritage to new generation, shortage of *syair* practitioner among the old generation and the love of young generation towards pop music has made the transfer of traditional heritage especially *syair* cut off.

5. Initiatives towards the Conservation of *Syair*

There are some steps and actions taken towards conservation of the *syair*, to wide spread the writing of *syair* and practicing of *syair* among local community. Some of the steps and actions taken by certain agency to introduce *syair* to attract interest of today generation to produce *syair* are:

5.1 Collection and Documentation

As an institution responsible for the collection of local inherited treasure, The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport through its departments has conducted research and collection of *syair* for the purpose of study and conservation as well as to give talks to the public. Archives Section of Museum Department has so far able to accumulate some *syair* for reference, such as *Syair Awang Semaun*. The Language and Literature Bureau had published *syair*; some of them are *Syair Perlembagaan* written by Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III, *Syair Rakis*, *Syair Rajang Hari*, *Syair Yang Dipertuan* and others. Beside that, the History Centre Department is actively doing research and publishing historical *syair*. For example *Syair Perlembagaan Negeri Brunei* and Royal Poet Book. The publishing and documentation of *syair* can help in reviving and give information to the community especially the local *syair* lover and practitioner.

5.2 Workshop/Contest/Show

As a department responsible for the language development, the Language and Literature Bureau is actively organizing some workshops including *syair* writing workshop. For example in 1992, the department organized Syair Writing Competition in conjunction with Silver Jubilee of His Majesty ascending the throne; total to 12 writings. The workshop was able to produce some quality *syair* writer and can be considered as the generation to who would continue local *syair*. Most of the *syair* in the contest were more historical focusing the Silver Jubilee of the reign of His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkhiah and one *syair* narrating the glittering and excellence reign of the Late Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien well known as the Architect of Modern Brunei. Some of the *syair* are *Syair Ristaan Budi* written by Pengiran Haji Aji Pengiran Haji Md Tahir, *Syair Menjunjung Hasrat* written by Awang Haji Zawawi bin Haji Ahmad, *Syair Payung Mahkota*, *Syair 25 Tahun Penuh Kecemerlangan* – Dayang Maswati binti Haji Abu bakar, *Syair Seri Begawan*, *Syair Ristaan*, *Syair Brunei Berdaulat*, *Syair Negara Melayu Islam Beraja*, *Syair Kepimpinan dan Keagungan*, *Syair Negara Brunei Makmur dan Indah*, *Syair Kemerdekaan Di Atas Takhta Duli Baginda* and *Syair Keagungan dan Kemajuan Negara Di Bawah Pimpinan Kebawah Duli Yang Maha Mulia* (Haji Abdul Hamid bin Jaludin 1992)

Wide spreading and dissemination of information about *syair* also done by Radio Television Brunei Department by audio recording, tv show and others. Audio recording is kept or published in the form of cassette and *cd*.

5.3 Individual Contribution

One of the *syair* practitioner (poet & workshop organizer) who is still active till today is Awang Haji Emran bin Haji Aji, also better known as Mas. His skills and capabilities in reciting the *syair* are well recognized/accepted. He is usually invited to conduct workshops in secondary schools and also invited by the Language and Literature Bureau to perform the *syair*. The *syair* workshop was first introduced in 1990's and is still continuing until today, twice a month.

6. Conclusion

If we look into the content of the *Syair Perlembagaan Brunei*, it can be categorized as historical *syair*. Other than describing history it also illustrates the intelligent thoughts and skills of the Late Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien in arranging the beautiful rhymes and words for the listeners to easily understand. In preserving the quality of the local *syair*, it is the responsibility of all community to protect and enrich the traditional inherited literature so that the younger generation can appreciate and learn.