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Malay singing in Pahang villages: identity and practice

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CHAPTER 5

AMATEUR MUSIC GROUPS (*NAZAM BERENDOI* AND *DIKIR REBANA*), AND YOUNG WOMEN AND MUSIC

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on musical genres performed by amateurs. In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss two Islamic-oriented songs: *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*, their social contexts and how community is created through the songs. The Malays in Pahang villages have sung *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* for a long time. They take Islamic-oriented songs seriously as these songs are seen to fall into the category of respectable music genres (Beeman, 2011; Jähnichen, 2012). In the second part of this chapter the participation of young women in music is reviewed. It considers with how young women derive meaning from the music that they practise and/or listen to in everyday life, and how they appreciate local musical cultural forms as leisure.

Nazam berendoi and *dikir rebana* are culturally significant in the musical repertoire of the Malays in Pahang villages. They consist of vocal music in which texts taken from the Islamic book of the *Kitab Barzanji* (*mawlid*) and from vernacular sources, such as *nazam* and *pantun* poetry, are sung. Reading from the *Kitab Barzanji* has been practised for more than two hundred years. From the nineteenth century onwards, along with other Islamic works, it formed part of the preaching activity of religious leaders following the growth of Islamic schools (*sekolah pondok*) in Pahang.

In the context of the historical music practices described in Chapter 2, reading from the *Kitab Barzanji* took place alongside *zikir* to celebrate the Prophet's birthday (Misa 94: 33). Although *nazam*, *pantun* and other vernacular texts featured at a variety of celebrations and ceremonies, none of the Malay literary works indicated that vernacular texts were read alongside the *Kitab Barzanji*. In this sense, in contemporary Pahang, reading the *Kitab Barzanji* has been transformed by incorporating vernacular texts and, as a result, has led to the emergence of a new genre.

In the past, it was men who dominated these traditional Islamic-associated musical genres and in this way they passed on these songs to their

female contemporaries. Until the 1970s, men-only and women-only singing groups were still actively performing *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* in each village (Awang Samah, personal communication, 22 January 2019). However, during the course of my research in 2016, only women's singing groups were performing and dominating the traditions of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*. I was told that all-male singing groups were no longer present in the village and that the situation was similar in other villages. This raises the question – why are men rarely seen performing songs as amateurs in the present day?

There may be a number of reasons for the lack of men's participation in both of these amateur singing traditions. Forty to fifty years ago, the men involved in performing the songs were mainly village workers who inherited their work from their parents. As they spent most of their time in the villages they could learn these lay performances, including *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*, from the older generation, and had time to rehearse them. The decline in the number of male singing groups started in the 1990s as the result of men moving to occupations in the industrial and construction sectors which promised them a more lucrative income than local work. Consequently men no longer practise *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* as their jobs require them to be away from their villages, and their spare time is restricted.

Another reason may be due to the early death of the men who performed these songs. In the village of Jeram Landak, for instance, male practitioners of *dikir rebana* are no longer found, although the song continues to be performed by an elderly women's singing group (Wan Saodah, personal communication, 7 March 2018). In the past early deaths among men were primarily due to breathing difficulties, with respiratory ill-health being more common among men than women (Aripin Said, personal communication, 2 June 2018).

Nevertheless, the increase in amateur singing groups made up of young men who are educated at religious schools (*madrasah*) has, to some extent, helped to perpetuate male singing groups in Pahang. This, however, is not explored further here as it is beyond the scope of this study. Women in the villages continue the traditions of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*. In both vocal musical performances, amateur women singers use content from the Islamic book, the *Kitab Barzanji*, as sung texts. The *Kitab Barzanji* contains stories of the Prophet Muhammad's birth and praises his life and teachings. The following section provides a brief introduction to the *Kitab Barzanji*.

5.2 The Islamic book, the *Kitab Barzanji*

Malay cultural practices are an important aspect of life events, such as birth ceremonies, tonsure rituals, male circumcisions and weddings. In Malay society, a recitation from the Islamic book the *Kitab Barzanji* (Figure 5.1) is typically included as part of these rituals to ensure that it can help ‘in fulfillment of vows or to ward off danger’ (Bruinessen, 1990: 261). Sufism, the spiritual and mystical tradition of Islam, looks to praise and celebrate the Prophet Muhammad. In this, the *Kitab Barzanji* plays an important role by contributing poems and songs to these celebrations (Knappert, 1985). In West Malaysia, recitations from the *Kitab Barzanji* is known as *marhaban* (songs of praise for the Prophet) and takes place on the anniversary of the Prophet’s birthday (12 *Rabī al-awwal*), when celebrating Eid-Ul Fitr, or even as a weekly devotion. Prose and poetry in local dialects are also expressed during *mawlid* (Frishkopf, 2008).



Figure 5.1: The cover of the Islamic book, the *Kitab Barzanji*

The *Kitab Barzanji* was named after its author, Syekh Ja'far al-Barzanji Ibn Hasan Ibn Abdul Karim (Federspiel, 1995), who was born in Medina in 1690 and died in 1766. Syed Ja'far was Muslim and an Islamic

scholar (Fuad, 2009). Written in Arabic, the book contains prayers, praise and historical narratives of the Prophet Muhammad (his genealogy, childhood, adolescence and young life until he was appointed to be the Messenger of Allah). While it is well known that copies of the *Kitab Barzanji* are now produced in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, the exact date of the original manuscript is unknown (Said, 2011). The Malays often refer to the *Kitab Barzanji*, as it is the most revered book after the Qur'an.

The book was not written exclusively by Syeikh Ja'far al-Barzanji. His great grandson, Sayyid Zain al-Abidin Ibn Sayyid Muhammad al-Hadi was also a contributor to the text. The *Kitab Barzanji* is designated as one of Islam's literary creations (Raharjo, 2012). This Islamic book not only contains *mawlid* readings (referring to the time or place of birth), but also contains *qasida*, prayers and *ratib*. *Qasida* is the name given in Arabic to poems of a certain length, the content of which contain moral and religious lessons. It is also an Islamic musical genre in which chanting is accompanied by someone playing a *rebana*. It has become commonly practised in the Malay world due both to the growth of overseas travel and the subsequent increasing flows of people, and to the use of modern mass media (Rasmussen, 2010). Interestingly, in Indonesia the genre *qasida modèren* is a rock- and *dangdut*-influenced version of traditional *qasida rebana* (Arps, 1996). *Ratib* is the constant repetition of the name of Allah, creating a sort of ecstatic trance, and is chanted to the accompaniment of a *rapa'i* and a *tambu* (Hurgronje, 1906). Even though *ratib* has religious significance, its performance provides simple pleasure in the Islamic community. These various genres of sung invocation are closely associated with Qur'anic cantillation.

For Muslims, the *Kitab Barzanji* is read or recited in remembrance of the Prophet Muhammad's life and with the hope of receiving blessings from Allah the Almighty. 'It has an important role in Islamic education in the Archipelago down to the present day' (Braginsky, 1996: 376). The tradition of reading the *Kitab Barzanji* is a noble one (Sholikhin, 2011). Commemorating the Prophet is a commendable act in addition to performing the other activities of worship in Islam. Muslims believe that singing in this context will ensure that they receive the help of the Prophet in the hereafter. The *Kitab Barzanji* contains six chapter headings, each of which has a number of sections (Table 4). Two chapters which are popular with Malays are the half-prose, half-verse *Maulud Sharaf al-Annam*, a work of an introductory nature praising the Prophet Muhammad and narrating his birth, and *Maulud al-Barzanji Nathar*, the prose version of the *al-Barzanji mawlid*. From these two chapters, a reader may select a few standard sections to recite.

Having witnessed a number of women's groups in Malaysia reciting from the *Kitab Barzanji*, some sections are frequently chosen, including *aljannatu wa na'imuhâ* and *walamma tammamin*. These two sections are among the nineteen sections that come under the heading of *Maulud al-Barzanji Nathar*. According to Rasmussen (2005), the sound of Qur'anic recitation generally occurs in several genres of Islamic vocal arts including recitations from the *Kitab Barzanji*.

Table 4: List of chapter headings in the *Kitab Barzanji*

Chapters in the <i>Kitab Barzanji</i>	Number of sections
1. <i>Maulud Sharaf al-Annam</i>	21
2. <i>Maulud al-Barzanji Nathar</i>	19
3. <i>Maulud al-Barzanji Nazam</i>	18
4. <i>Qasida al-Burdah</i>	10
5. <i>Doa Khatam</i>	13
6. <i>Hazihi Aqidah al-Awwam</i>	1

According to Kaptein (1993: 130), the section *Maulud Sharaf al-Annam* includes the famous song of praises to the Prophet Muhammad and a fresh series of eulogies to him beginning with 'ya nabi salam'alaika'/ 'O, Prophet, peace be upon thee' (...) 'ashraqa al-badru 'alayna'/ 'The full moon rose over us' (...). Kaptein also states that, although it is a very well-known text, the author of this section is unknown. The end of the recitation of each section is followed by invoking *salawat* (prayers, grace and blessings) on the Prophet Muhammad, in the form known as *Salawat Qiyam*. Based on my experience of attending women's ceremonial recitations of the *Kitab Barzanji* in several states in Malaysia, women practise the *salawat* invocation standing up.

Reference to this specific practice of standing during *salawat* was made by Kaptein (1993), whose work established that this is something which has been debated over a long period by both traditionalists and reformists in Indonesia. Whether or not standing is permitted during *salawat* is a major topic of debate among Indonesian Muslims. While it is not something I intend to discuss further here, I would mention briefly that standing during *salawat* has been practised at several national *salawat* events including the 2015 *Salawat*

Perdana Malam Cinta Rasul (National Prayer for the Prophet) held in Putra Mosque Square in Putrajaya (Astro Gempak, YouTube, 21 March 2014).

Reading the *Kitab Barzanji* is seen as a very appropriate way for (traditional) Malays to celebrate life. It is regarded as a way of expressing joyful feelings over the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the bearer of grace to the world (Fuad, 2009). However, for women in Pahang's villages, recitations from the *Kitab Barzanji* are used in a different way. Here, the recitations are incorporated into the performance of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*. In the following section, I shall first discuss the lay song, *nazam berendoi*.

5.3 *Nazam berendoi*

Nazam comes from an Arabic term meaning composition. Mat Piah (1989) remarks that *nazam* includes poems written about the life and miracles of the Prophet; poems about *tauhid*, the twenty attributes of Allah (*sifat dua puluh*) and the qualities of the Prophet; and treatises on the pillars of Islam. *Nazam* is an Islamic art connected with the Islamic preachers who are responsible for disseminating the teachings of Islam at religious institutions in Malaysia. At these institutions *nazam* is sung by the students during break-times between lessons. *Berendoi* comes from the Malay word for lullaby, *dodoi*. The history of *nazam berendoi* is unclear. However, according to local people, the song could possibly be related to the traditional celebrations held for new-born babies in the nineteenth century. A religious singing group monopolized by men from a religious institution would sing a number of songs at such celebrations. Women eventually learnt the song from their men at home, as there were no religious institutions for women at that time.

The performance of *nazam berendoi* in Pahang villages draws on two sources: the *Kitab Barzanji* and vernacular texts comprising eleven stanzas. The first section in *Maulud al-Barzanji Nathar, aljannatu wa na'imuhâ* is the common factor in the performance of *nazam berendoi* (for the complete section please refer to Appendix IV). Briefly, this section is full of praises to Allah the Almighty and to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. The vernacular texts take a moralistic approach, with education and instructions for the newly born baby to be a good servant of Allah, to follow the teachings of His Messenger, to be a good person to his or her parents, and to have a blessed life. It can be used as teaching material for the formation of character. *Nazam berendoi* is performed in a ritual that celebrates the arrival of the new-born baby. It is vocalized without the accompaniment of musical instruments. The above

description of *nazam berendoi* is based on my participant-observation of a tonsure ritual at which it was performed by a women-only singing group. About eighty guests including family members and relatives were invited to this event. In the following section, I shall first describe the background of the women's singing group.

5.3.1 The women's singing group and its background

The group consists of twenty-five members aged between thirty and sixty. Makcik Ani is the group's leader. Makcik Ani and Makcik Noor (see Figure 5.2) provided the information about the group of *nazam berendoi* singers in this book. Most of the women are housewives with children (of varying ages). They live in a police neighbourhood as their husbands are policemen. The women's singing group was formed through the *Persatuan Keluarga Polis* or PERKEP (the Police Family Association) in the early 1990s. The group's objective is to fulfil invitations to religious events (mainly on Friday nights), including the celebration of Eid-Ul Fitr, tonsure rituals, male circumcisions and *maulud*. Members of the group are volunteers and unpaid.



Figure 5.2: Makcik Ani (right) and Makcik Noor demonstrating *nazam berendoi* to the author

Nazam berendoi is one of the songs in the group's repertoire and is one that is specifically performed at the tonsure ritual, which is held between the seventh and fortieth day after the baby is born. When I asked how the women became familiar with *nazam berendoi*, Makcik Ani replied that she learnt the tune from her grandparents. When she was growing up she lived with

her grandparents in Temerloh. When she was in her early teens, Makcik Ani, with her peers, used to follow and watch her grandmother and her women-only singing group performing *nazam berendoi* on many occasions at tonsure rituals. Based on this, I sense that, decades ago, women and young girls attended *nazam berendoi* performances in large numbers. A few years after her marriage in 1980, Makcik Ani moved with her husband, who works as a policeman, to Kuantan. She brought with her the song of *nazam berendoi* that she had learnt from her grandmother.

In Kuantan, Makcik Ani was responsible for teaching *nazam berendoi* to her group members. Since she could not remember the original sung text, she wrote a new composition that fitted the tune she had learnt from her grandmother. From this account, it appears that the tune of *nazam berendoi* is passed on to other women's singing groups through oral transmission. Makcik Ani and her singing group practise their singing (including *nazam berendoi*) after reciting *Surah Yaseen* (one of the chapters of the Qur'an) in a local community hall, mainly on Thursday evenings.

Besides the *Kitab Barzanji*, the women also bring along copies of vernacular sung texts to their singing practice. The women do not expect monetary reward from their singing activities. Despite this, they are serious about their participation in the group and are prepared to invest their time in training. For the women, the intrinsic reward from the activity itself is greater than any financial gain. This complies with Stebbins's (1982) view that activities which require commitment and for which there are extrinsic reasons to participate can be termed 'serious leisure'.

In summary then, the amateur women's singing group perform *nazam berendoi*, which the group learnt orally from a member who had previously learnt the song from her grandmother. In the following section, I describe and reflect on the performance of *nazam berendoi* at a tonsure ritual in November 2014.

5.3.2 The performance of *nazam berendoi*

The celebration took place in a community hall in Kuantan, Pahang, with the ritual beginning at 8 pm after the fourth prayer on a Thursday night. As can be seen in Figure 5.3, the women's singing group took their place on the carpeted floor, just in front of the decorated crib on the dais. All of them wore matching clothing and head coverings. Family members and relatives took their seats around the edge of the hall, after which the women began by

singing *Asma'ul Husna*, the ninety-nine names of Allah, followed by a recitation of *al-Fatihah*. *Al-Fatihah* (Appendix V) is the first chapter (Sūra) of the Qur'an. It has seven verses which together form a prayer asking for the guidance and mercy of Allah.

The reading of the *Kitab Barzanji* then took place. Several members of the singing group recited two sections from the *Kitab Barzanji* very clearly and with the aid of a microphone so that their voices could be heard in every corner of the hall. After this recitation, the ritual was held to bless the baby. *Salawat* subsequently took place. All those present in the hall stood up. During the recitation of *salawat*, the mother took her child out of the crib and cradled the new-born baby ready for the hair-shaving ritual.



Figure 5.3: The singing group in a circle singing *nazam berendoi*

The baby was then brought into the circle of women singers accompanied by a person holding a tray containing the essential equipment needed, according to Malay custom, for the baby's hair-cutting ceremony. The essential equipment includes holy water (*air zam-zam*), sweets and fresh flower potpourri (*bunga rampai*), with some ingredients having a strong pre-Islamic influence. One member of the women's singing group shaved a small part of the baby's hair while she reciting *salawat*. Then a second member took her place and did the same, and this carried on through all the members of the singing group. After the last member of the group had completed shaving the baby's hair, the baby was then returned to the cradle on the dais. With that, the *salawat* recitation ended.

Following a break of a few seconds, the performance of *nazam berendoi* then took place. The singing group took out printed pamphlets containing the eleven-stanza-long sung text and started to sing *nazam berendoi*. The first four lines, with translation, are as follows:

*Nazam dimulakan dengan Bismillah,
disudahi pula Alhamdulillah,
janganlah anak berhati gundah,
dikau diayun nazam ditambah.*

This song begins with the name of Allah,
will end with gratitude to Allah,
please don't, my dear, feel lonely,
you're in a swing, the song continues.

The group then continued with the second stanza and so on (for the full text please refer to Appendix VI). Each stanza was followed by the Arabic invocation: *Lailahailallah Muhammad Rasulullah* (There is no God but God, Muhammad is the messenger to Allah). The vernacular sung text was sung in a repeated melody in a soft and gentle voice, with slight nasal resonance. The singing ended with the eleventh stanza as follows:

*Tamatlah sudah anak diayunkan,
beramai-ramai kawan dengarkan,
salah dan silap harap dimaafkan,
makan dan minum minta halalkan.*

That is the end for this event,
we sing in the crowd,
please forgive us if we make mistakes,
thank you for the dishes and drinks.

Voices were pitched higher during the invocation and the melody. The group's vocal element included Malay vocal ornaments that are common in traditional Malay music. Not all the women had a high vocal range, while those who were able led the group using vibrato and improvisational techniques. As with *pantun* verses, the singing style is mainly syllabic (Matusky & Tan, 2017). The sung text is the same as the group has used previously at tonsure rituals; it is not published commercially nor is it available in any Islamic book. Even though, according to Makcik Ani, the new-born child cannot understand the content of the song, it is hoped that the song will prompt the adults present to follow the guidance from the sung text.

This section has illustrated how the women singers associate *nazam berendoi* with Islam. This can be drawn from their appearance, in wearing headscarves for example, and in their recitations from the *Kitab Barzanji*, which is very highly regarded in many Malay Muslim communities. *Nazam berendoi* is mainly performed at tonsure rituals to celebrate a new-born child. At such rituals, a women's singing group is invited to recite several sections of the *Kitab Barzanji*, followed by recitation of *salawat* and finishing with the song *nazam berendoi*. Family members and relatives of all ages usually make up the audience for the celebration. The tradition possesses some Islamic characteristics in that they perform the song for religious purposes. Traditionally, *nazam berendoi* is not accompanied by instruments. It can be presumed that at the time that performance of *nazam berendoi* became common at such rituals, instruments were unlikely to have been used within the Islamic environment, a situation that remains the same today.

5.3.3 The creation of community through *nazam berendoi*

The Malays in the villages of Pahang have long performed the religiously inspired song of *nazam berendoi*. In Pahang, one does not have to be a professional musician to perform *nazam berendoi*. However, despite the existence of middle-aged and elderly women's singing groups, the performance of this song is experiencing a general decline. The singing groups have not led to an expansion of general interest among young people.

I noticed that there is less interest among young people in participating in *nazam berendoi* performances. A general perception from the older performers is that young people are not interested in *nazam berendoi* because of the availability and influence of other, more appealing, forms of entertainment. They are particularly aware of how young people's lives are constantly changing. Although it may still be valued as a form of cultural heritage, the decline of the performance of *nazam berendoi* is related to how young people perceive it.

From my brief conversation with Yana, a young mother of one, *nazam berendoi* is seen as less important. Moreover, she did not include the performance of *nazam berendoi* in her daughter's tonsure ritual (Yana, personal communication, 28 September 2019). As a result, it is interesting to speculate on whether or not *nazam berendoi* will be valued less as a cultural asset. Its credentials as a music practice may be undermined over time.

There are fewer young women in the villages these days as a result of them moving away for work and, with greater numbers migrating to more urban areas, there is a question mark over the long-term viability of the song. However, in evaluating *nazam berendoi*'s longevity it is important to differentiate between the factors that may account for people's lack of opportunity to learn and perform in *nazam berendoi*, and those that may account for people's lack of interest in learning and performing it. Of course, the two are interrelated.

There is no sign of a commercial market for *nazam berendoi* in Pahang – for example, in the form of its publication on CD. I visited several music shops selling CDs, but could not find any item related to *nazam berendoi*. However, on the video-sharing platform, YouTube, I found several videos uploaded by individuals of performances of *nazam berendoi* by women's singing groups in the neighbouring state of Perak. I discovered that the women in Perak used a rather similar sung text to that of the women's singing groups in Pahang villages, but with a different tune. In one video (Mohdazmi10, Youtube, 21 March 2017), I noted that the setting of the *nazam berendoi* performance in Perak was similar to that of the *nazam berendoi* performance in Pahang. The women were seated in a circle on a carpeted floor in the middle of a house. Each of them referred to a white book while performing the song. There was no indication on YouTube, however, of a community becoming involved in dialogue or leaving comments below the video.

There is, however, one commercial recording of *nazam berendoi* by Aishah, a solo female singer who is very well-known in Malaysia and Indonesia (Aishah-Topic, YouTube, 2 September 2016). The song was produced for a music album by NC Records and released in 2010. Like the women in Pahang, Aishah sang *nazam berendoi* without any musical accompaniment. The content of the song is similar to that of the *nazam berendoi* performed by the women's singing group in Pahang.

The government's cultural agency, *Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara* (the National Department for Culture and the Arts) has shared an informative video on YouTube to introduce the Islamic art of *nazam* in Melaka (Bahagian RnD JKKN, YouTube, 4 December 2013). In the video, a women's singing group from Melaka demonstrated two different ways of performing *nazam*: *serkam* and *tanjung*. However, neither of these is associated with *nazam berendoi* in Pahang.

To summarize, there is less participation by young people in the performance of *nazam berendoi* for several reasons, including the fact that young women are migrating to urban areas for work. They have no inclination to perform *nazam berendoi*. The way young people think about the Islamic art of *nazam berendoi* may contribute to the demise of the song in Pahang. Its survival in Pahang is seriously in doubt. Meanwhile, modern technology and a small number of commercial recordings have raised the profile of the song, as well as leading to the creation of *nazam berendoi* as a media-bound genre. This echoes the case of Minangkabau, a children's folk-music genre that has 'become extinct in contemporary Indonesian local culture, having been replaced by new mediated counterparts' (Suryadi, 2014: 192).

5.4 *Dikir rebana*

The word *dikir* in the Pahang dialect comes from the word *zikir*, while *rebana* comes from Arabic word, *rabbana*, which means Allah. According to Matusky and Tan (2017) the Islamic religion encourages and teaches the practice of *zikir* with the intention of obtaining peace, tranquillity and happiness. 'As recorded in the Qur'an and Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), the practice of *zikir* embodies focusing the mind in order to overcome problems of spiritual stress, to obtain peace, happiness and gifts from Allah' (Matusky & Tan, 2017: 237). The main musical instrument played during the performance of *dikir* is the *rebana Pahang* (the Pahang frame drum) as seen in Figure 5.4. Pahang frame drums vary in size, but are relatively large (approximately 50-54 cm in diameter, 12 to 15 cm deep). The head of the drum, made of goatskin, is pinned to a hardwood frame.

The other name of *dikir rebana* is *dikir burdah* or *dikir mawlid*. The main sung text is taken primarily from the *Kitab Barzanji*. The tradition of *dikir rebana* in Pahang may have had some historical interface with the performing arts from Minangkabau, one of the major sources of Malay culture. In the context of the Minangkabau practice, Kartomi (2012) points out that the vocalists recite the texts from *Kitab Barzanji* to their own percussive brass-tray accompaniment. Similar names for the activity also occur in the inland areas of all the provinces along the Sumatran coast. 'People living in the coastal areas including along the banks of the long eastbound rivers and in the former kingdoms share many similar rituals, songs [...] and instrumental ensembles' (Kartomi, 2012: 16).



Figure 5.4: A Pahang frame drum being played in a *dikir rebana* performance in 1963
(source: The Malaysian Institute of Language and Literature, Kuala Lumpur)

Dikir rebana is based on Sufism practices (the inner dimension of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad). When singing *dikir rebana*, voices are high-pitched and strident, and it is important to have good control of the breath. In *dikir rebana*, the reciters sit down with their legs crossed while singing one of the sections from the *Kitab Barzanji*. They beat a frame drum to accompany their own vocal expressions. The reciter beats the edge or in the middle of the head of the drum.

The following is based on a group discussion about *dikir rebana* that I organized on 25 September 2016 (Figure 5.5). For comparative purposes, I have also referred to two other resources. The first is a 2005 video recording of an interview session between researchers from the Malaysian Institute of Language and Literature, Kuala Lumpur and an elderly man performing *dikir rebana* music. This resource provides a historical account of *dikir rebana* music in Pahang. The second resource is a video of a performance by the women's singing group from Jeram Landak in 2015. The video supports my description of *dikir rebana* and is owned by Muhammad Yunus, a member of the Cakna Anak Pahang Association from Jerantut, Pahang.



Figure 5.5: The author conducting a group discussion with members of a *dikir rebana* group in the village of Jeram Landak

5.4.1 The women's singing group and its background

A women-only singing group was formed in the 1980s in the village of Jeram Landak. In the 1990s, the group had more than ten members. Nowadays, only five members remain and most of them are elderly. It is the only women's singing group performing *dikir rebana* in Pahang. Each of them is experienced in Qur'anic recitation. Wan Fatimah, aged eighty-nine, leads the singing group. To make ends meet, the women support their families by taking on a variety of paid work locally. They go rubber-tapping early in the morning and take farm laboring jobs whenever possible.

Some of the group's members are widows and remain alone; others need to take care of their husbands. For Wan Saodah, who is sixty-eight, besides taking care of her husband, she also looks after her three grandchildren of primary-school age. Early every morning, the children are sent by their parents to her home for day care. The children are only collected in the evening, after the parents return from work. Sometimes, the children will stay over for the whole night (Wan Saodah, personal communication, 25 September, 2016).

Wan Fatimah and Wan Saodah responded to my enquiries as to how they became involved in *dikir rebana* performances. I have included quotations instead of paraphrasing or summarizing in order to present their views in their

own voices. Wan Fatimah responded: 'It was a long time ago. I learnt *dikir rebana* from my grandfather. He was my music teacher. From him, I learnt how to play the frame drum.' Her late grandfather was the influence on her to learn the song. As a result, she was asked to learn to perform readings of the Qur'an before she went on to learn the *Kitab Barzanji*.

As she indicated, she had learnt to play frame drum and when I asked her how much time would be needed to learn *dikir rebana*, her response was that five years would be ideal for someone to become proficient at playing *dikir rebana* music. She does not have any specific way to train her voice. When she first learnt to sing *dikir rebana*, there was no electricity in the village, and no microphone. She had to sing loudly to make sure that people would hear the song. In the singing demonstration, I could hear Wan Fatimah singing with a clear voice, although it was not that loud because of a health condition. People in the village consider Wan Fatimah to be the oldest *dikir rebana* practitioner. She is now the key person who teaches *dikir rebana* music to others.

Meanwhile, Wan Saodah stated: 'I learnt the music from my female friends. I joined them indirectly, and we formed a *dikir rebana* group. I followed their music training held in the evenings.' Wan Saodah's musical education – through a relationship with female peers – reflects a similar musical education situation to that found among the women of Sambas in Indonesia. Mee (2012) in her work on *zikir maulid* amongst Sambas Malays found that Sambas women practise and learn the text of *zikir maulid* in the evenings, during meetings with women from other villages. Wan Saodah had learnt *dikir rebana* by involving herself in her peers' musical training and imitating the way they read the *Kitab Barzanji* and played the frame drum.

Dikir rebana is performed as entertainment at weddings, child-naming parties, tonsure rituals and male circumcisions and to celebrate those who have completed reading the Qur'an (mainly on Friday nights). If an event occurs away from their village, the women will ask the men in their family for their help. The men will then accompany them, acting as guardians of the group and supporting their needs. However, in recent years, the women have been unable to fulfil invitations, especially outside the village, due to ill health.

To summarize, the women-only singing group from Jeram Landak is the only singing group performing *dikir rebana* in Pahang. They participate in *dikir rebana* for personal, religious and social reasons, but recently the women have been less active due to health problems. The song is considered an endangered song genre in Pahang. In the following part, I shall analyse the

performance of *dikir rebana* based on a group discussion with the performers, and supported by a recording of their performance made in 2015.

5.4.2 The performance of *dikir rebana*

The performance of *dikir rebana* has attracted the attention many people, in particular that of the late Pahang Empress, the late Tengku Afzan Tengku Panglima Perang Muhammad (r. 1974-1988). During her lifetime, Tengku Afzan showed her enthusiasm for *dikir rebana* music. A well-established *dikir rebana* group at that time came from Jeram Landak in Kuala Lipis, Pahang. In the 1980s, this group gained local fame as it was often called upon to perform *dikir rebana* music for Tengku Afzan and her guests. Tengku Afzan also initiated the renaming of *dikir rebana* as *dikir Pahang* due to the ability of the performers to produce impromptu quatrains of *pantun* in Pahang dialect (Wan Saodah, personal communication, 25 September 2016).

Performers are generally seated cross-legged in a semi-circle for performances of *dikir rebana* music, as illustrated in Figure 5.6. This photograph portrays a group of five elderly women seated on the floor while performing. Each of them plays a frame drum. However, according to Wan Saodah, the current frame drums being used for *dikir rebana* are from music ensembles of the *dikir barat* music genre, originally from the state of Kelantan. This is because the Pahang frame drum is no longer available. The performance of *dikir rebana* begins with the invocation of *salawat marhaban* (songs to praise the Prophet Muhammad) and *zikir*. The well-known sung text is from the section *Qasida al-Bariah* under the chapter *Qasida al-Burdah* in the *Kitab Barzanji*.



Figure 5.6: A screenshot from a video recording of a *dikir rebana* performance by elderly women from Jeram Landak in 2015 (source: Muhamad Yunus)

The women's singing group knows the section *Qasida al-Bariah* simply as *amin tazaki*, which is the first verse of the section (see Figure 5.7). The song consists of two to four stanzas which have been developed from two to four lines of this section of the text. The lyrics are sometimes pronounced incorrectly, and are sometimes changed to something totally different from the original. Besides *amin tazaki*, several other sections are also used, including *bisyahrin*, *walamma*, *walidanhabi*, *badat*, *alha*, *yamawlidan*, and *yahabibun*. Each section is performed to a specific tune. The well-respected lyrics from the *Kitab Barzanji* are in Arabic and, as there is no translation into Malay available to the women in the singing group, they do not understand the lyrics they are singing. I feel sure that they do not understand the meaning of the book; they only know that it is a biography and a book of praise of the Prophet.

Even though the sung texts are in Arabic, the women's group does not appear to follow an Arabic style of singing, nor is there an Islamic influence in terms of the sounds of Qur'anic cantillation. Despite using the Islamic book of *Kitab Barzanji*, their music has a more traditional Malay musical style. Their singing pace is slow and drawn out. Vocally, *dikir rebana* music highlights Malay elements such as language and vocal ornamentations, and the vocal singing pitches are different to Western ones. Specific moods are associated with the singing style of *dikir rebana*, including sadness and misery.



Figure 5.7: An excerpt of *amin tazaki* in the *Kitab Barzanji*

I was unable to witness a live performance of *dikir rebana* during the course of my fieldwork. However, I felt honoured to witness a singing demonstration by these elderly women during the group discussion on 24 September 2016. I observed that *dikir rebana* has special singing characteristics. The first singer chanted two lines from the *Kitab Barzanji* to the accompaniment of frame drums played by other singers. She then followed this with the recitation of an impromptu quatrain of *pantun* in Pahang dialect. The second singer took over and repeated this singing pattern with a different text and *pantun*, and so it continued until they had all taken part. They chanted the texts of the *Kitab Barzanji* by heart even though a copy of the book was in front of them. While the singer was chanting and reciting the rest of the group would concentrate on playing their frame drums in a basic rhythm, over and over again. As this was only a singing demonstration, these elderly women only chanted the first part of the *Qasida al-Bariah* from the *Kitab Barzanji* and recited four quatrains of *pantun* spontaneously in their local Pahang dialect.

The quatrains of *pantun* (in Appendix VII) are an important feature of the performance, raising the audience's spirits and injecting a sense of fun. There is no specific theme to the *pantun*. In the *pantun*, the women indirectly

state their aspirations and desires. For instance, in this demonstration, Wan Saodah recited a *pantun* verse to request drinking water to ease a sore throat:

*Betik diperam di waktu pagi,
kain langsir di atas para,
wahai encik yang baik hati,
mintalah air pengubat suara.*

A papaya is fermented in the morning,
(there is) a curtain on the shelf,
dear Sir with a kind heart,
I need water to ease a sore throat.

Several important musical characteristics should be highlighted. The way in which Wan Saodah recited the first quatrain of *pantun* sounded very similar to *sprechgesang* or spoken singing. The lines are delivered in a syllabic singing style and with a narrow melodic range. The voices reciting *pantun* and the sound of the frame drum are said to add to the clamour of voices outside and to fill the air with unexpected cheer. The women ended their *dikir rebana* performance by chanting the following in an amusing way:

*Mike mengantuk amboi mata dipejam,
tabik tuan dan puan amboi,
saya nak cabut selamat reban.*

I feel sleepy and I need to close my eyes,
salute to you,
I want to dismiss and good night.

To conclude, in performing *dikir rebana*, the singers draw on several sections from the *Kitab Barzanji* as sung texts. Despite using Arabic text, the singing melody is similar to traditional Malay songs and the tempo is slow and laboured. However, the women who provided me with a demonstration of *dikir rebana* were also able to produce impromptu, unwritten quatrains of *pantun*, normally used to amuse an audience. This reflects an oral tradition. While singing, the women beat frame drums simultaneously in a rhythmical pattern (*pukulan bertingkah*) and this accompaniment added to the characteristics of *dikir rebana* music. However, in the present day, Pahang frame drums are no longer used and they have now been replaced by a smaller frame drum, one that is normally used in *dikir barat* music from the neighbouring state of Kelantan.

During my field research, I realized that there is a lack of participation by young women in these amateur singing groups. This made me wonder what

musical activities young women in Pahang villages do become involved in? Thus, in the second part of this chapter, I will explore young women's participation in singing activities and reflect on the impact that these have on them.

5.4.3 The creation of community through *dikir rebana*

The musical art of *dikir rebana* stands out because of the existence of a singing group comprising middle-aged and elderly women who perform it. Despite the existence of this group, *dikir rebana* is experiencing a general decline. As with their counterparts in *nazam berendoi*, the women's group singing *dikir rebana* in Pahang has not led to an expansion of interest among young people. One of the singers identified the problem as being that modern music has a negative impact on local perceptions of *dikir rebana*. She also maintained that those who had received a formal education were more likely to regard *dikir rebana* as being a waste of time. However, in the digital environment, there is different story to be told about community and *dikir rebana*.

In the virtual world there are community groups posting videos of the performance of the Islamic art of *dikir rebana* on popular social media, such as Facebook. Rozmal on his Facebook page, has shared a video of a performance of *dikir rebana* by a men's singing group in the neighbouring state of Negri Sembilan. The performance was held as part of the celebrations for a young married couple. Unlike the women's singing group in Pahang who were seated, the men's singing group in Negri Sembilan stood while performing the song with the accompaniment of frame drums. *Dikir rebana* was performed to highlight the procession of the bride and groom to the reception party. Following Rozmal's post, Siti Hawa shared her view of the practice of *dikir rebana* in her village. According to her, the song was well-known in the 1960s and the 1970s. However, from the late 1990s, the popularity of this Islamic art decreased due to the presence of modern social media such as Facebook. On the other hand, Bahari Bujal had reposted Rozmal's video of the *dikir rebana* performance on his Facebook page, and went on to receive feedback from his virtual community.

Similarly, Noorsam uploaded a video of a *dikir rebana* performance by a men's singing group named *Kumpulan Rebana Batang Nyamor* from Negri Sembilan. The group performed the song on the night before a wedding. Most of the performers were elderly men; only a few children were involved as

the group's loyal audience. Noorsam's video received unexpected responses from his virtual community. After watching the video, Ali questioned whether *dikir rebana* was a tradition of indigenous people (*tradisi Orang Asli*) as he was unfamiliar with it. Rosni responded to this, confirming that *dikir rebana* is an Islamic art which is facing decline among the Malay population. Maimunah added that she was a big fan of *dikir rebana* even though she did not understand the sung text. Of all of the responses, I was most drawn to one from Aziz, who shed light on the Islamic art of *dikir rebana*. In his view, *dikir rebana* has long been a tradition of the Malays. He urged others to reinvent this tradition in an appropriate way for young people. Most of all, those posting and responding on social media indicated what they might have seen, heard or felt, even very briefly, with regard to the Islamic art of *dikir rebana*.

My investigations on YouTube have revealed some interesting insights. *Dikir rebana* is also performed in the neighbouring state of Kelantan, which is well-known for the tradition of *dikir barat*. At first glance, the characteristics of *dikir rebana* and *dikir barat* appear similar; however this is a fallacy. I have found some videos of *dikir rebana* performances in Kelantan (Nurin Khann, YouTube, 14 November 2018) and, in one, an all-male group of around ten to fifteen performers is seated in a straight line demonstrating *dikir rebana* involving body movements, alongside playing the drums. Unlike *dikir rebana* in Pahang, the performance of *dikir rebana* in Kelantan is enhanced by various motions of the arms, the swaying of the body, clapping and other dance-like gestures by the chorus members. These actions are common to most *dikir barat* groups in Kelantan, even though the movements differ slightly from one group to another. The *dikir rebana* groups in Kelantan sing verses of popular and non-religious texts in a responsorial style (Nurin Khann, YouTube, 14 November 2018). A *rebana kercing* (the rattling of a tambourine) and a gong are used to accompany the performance of *dikir rebana* in Kelantan.

Dikir rebana was also shown, again on YouTube, to be a cultural element at a Malay wedding in a community in Bukit China, Melaka. In the recording it was performed by an all-male group of singers during the procession of the bride and groom to the reception party (Utzet Ros, YouTube, 14 December 2015). Two musical instruments were used to accompany the singing in the procession: a frame drum and a gong. The group recited *salawat marhaban* throughout their entire performance. However, unlike the community on Facebook, no conversation took place in the comments' section under either of the videos on YouTube. It seems that the community is far more inclined to comment and respond than the community on YouTube, which seems to be a silent observer community.

To sum up, like specific extinct music cultures in other parts of the world, *dikir rebana* in Pahang is facing a decline among the Malays. Young people are no longer interested in becoming involved in performing *dikir rebana*. However, to some extent, performances of *dikir rebana* posted on social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, contribute to a participatory culture among young people. There they are able to view, comment on and vote for videos of *dikir rebana* performances. The commentary space allows them to address different issues and judgements concerning the Islamic art of *dikir rebana*. *Dikir rebana* on such new media not only stimulates young people to talk about their experiences using a rich vocabulary, but also reflects young people's cultural values, behaviours and beliefs.

5.5 Young women and music

My research on music at an amateur level also focuses on young women's participation in music. Through this under-documented aspect of young women's lives I explore the meanings they impart to the music they practise and/or listen to and to how they relate to different music forms as leisure. Much of young people's music is inevitably linked with escapism. Historical events, religious beliefs and tradition, together with modern day practices, influence young people to communicate meaning through the music they practise. Recent advances in new media and technology have changed how young women currently participate in music and what it means to them. Global forces have gradually influenced young women as technological advances have lessened geographical limitations. Music from all over the world is readily accessible, making it easy for young women to access it whenever they wish. The media are inevitably a powerful influence in young women's lives. Media consumption, 'gives adolescents a sense of being connected to a larger peer network' (Arnett, 1995: 524).

In the context of Malaysia, the new generation of young Malaysians (all of whom have grown up with computers at home) are active users of digital music technology. New media technologies, with a specific emphasis on the Internet and portable digital music devices, form an important part of young people's lives (Baboo et al., 2013). These young people have developed a contemporary culture through new media and give meaning to it. Their modern culture contributes a lot to their lifestyle, for instance, they are able to share music files over the Internet and can create personal collections of playlists.

The MP3 file format allows young people to freely download their favourite singers' songs in seconds, and can be shared with their friends. Collecting downloadable music files on digital devices has replaced physical record collecting. Downloading music from the Internet 'is the modern-day equivalent of taping a mate's album onto a cassette' (Mewton, 2001: 33), albeit just as illegal under copyright laws. There are numerous music websites which offer free downloads of music by both unknown and celebrated singers; some authorized and therefore legitimate, and some not.

A celebrated Malaysian pop singer, Siti Nurhaliza, provides an avenue of cultural expression and identity to young people locally. From a village background, Siti Nurhaliza who was born and raised in Pahang, has set a good example to her fans, especially her younger fans, in terms of having maintained a scandal-free image since entering the music industry. Siti Nurhaliza is credited with having popularized *irama Malaysia* (Malaysian rhythms), a modern pop music genre. This genre has been developed via a process of renouncing some of the purity of traditional Malay sounds to reflect a more modern sound that is attractive to young people.

Although *irama Malaysia* has evolved from traditional culture, it is not detached from it. It is 'a form of music movement wherein the musicians [seek] to revive traditional Malay music through pop music while projecting the authenticity in their songs' (Seneviratne, 2012: 137). *Irama Malaysia* exemplifies a particular kind of musical exotica. 'Young Malaysians who have no knowledge of Malay music have found the lively rhythms and scales, among other elements, exotic' (Tan, 2003: 101). Siti Nurhaliza has the ability to persuade a large number of youngsters to listen to, and to appreciate, *irama Malaysia*. She presents the music via a network of television shows and video clips. Siti Nurhaliza is regarded as 'the closest thing to a Malaysian identity when it comes to music' (Else in Seneviratne, 2012: 216).

To some, Siti Nurhaliza's songs are seen as pop music with a strong, traditional Malay music content. Young people need music to have this modern kind of sound in order for them to find it acceptable. With a modern rhythm to the music, young people listen to it, even though it has elements of traditional music within it. According to Pak Ngah, 'This is how youngster can easily take the music to be part of their popular genre' (Pak Ngah in Seneviratne, 2012: 219). Furthermore, young people are now coming to appreciate *irama Malaysia* especially because it has traditional elements in it. The use of indigenous instruments along with musical elements and the rhythmical pattern of Malay dance provide the pieces with the flavour of regional music (S. Atan, personal communication, 22 July 2018).

The spread of contemporary global culture via media technology has influenced young women in Pahang to become involved in traditional music as well as modern international music in different ways. For the purposes of this research, I had the opportunity to speak to four young women, aged between seventeen and twenty-three, about their interactions with music. In the following section I describe the backgrounds of these four young women from Temerloh, Pahang.

5.5.1 A brief summary of the participants' backgrounds

I first met Ida and Zira in April 2016 at their place of work, a clothes boutique. They had been working as sales assistants for less than two years. Ida and Zira are both fans of certain music genres and never miss cultural events, including concerts and music festivals. They had come from different school backgrounds: Ida had graduated from an Islamic secondary school while Zira had attended a national secondary school. After graduating from school in 2010, Ida had worked in the town helping her parents. Zira, on the other hand, had just graduated from school in 2016 and was waiting for an opportunity to continue her tertiary education at one of the government-funded universities in Shah Alam, Selangor. At the time that this research was being conducted both of them were living with their parents. Ida's parent is a domestic worker while Zira's parents work in the government sector.

A month later, I met the third participant, Ain, who was a student at Temerloh Secondary School. We met at a state-level *syair* singing competition, in which she was representing the district of Temerloh. At the competition, Ain won first prize and went on to represent Pahang at the national level in the *syair* competition held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2016. According to Ain's schoolteacher, who accompanied her to the competition, Ain was an icon among the students at her school. As a singer she was active in performing in school-based cultural and musical events.

Through Ain, I met the fourth participant, Arina, who was Ain's school friend. Like Ain, Arina also participated in musical events at school. Even though Arina seldom entered any singing competitions, she did take part in karaoke. Arina shared with me how she had become involved in music. Her primary school teacher was responsible for discovering her singing talent and, from a young age, Arina participated in musical activities at school. Traditional songs were among the music genres she would always sing. She credits her schoolteacher with being the major influence on her musical activities.

At the time of my fieldwork, Ain and Arina were in Form Five and were soon going to be sitting an important exam, the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education). The girls had come from different family backgrounds. Arina had come from a village located quite a distance from the school and, with a lack of public transport to the school. She had chosen to stay in the school dormitory. Staying in the dormitory made it easier for her to go to school every day. Meanwhile, Ain had chosen to stay at home with her parent, and would occasionally stay in the school dormitory when she needed to commit to extra music rehearsals at school.

Even though the four participants had come from different social family backgrounds, they shared a similar exposure to music through their parents: their mothers were all members of *marhaban* (songs of praise for the Prophet) groups in the village. When they were young, their mothers had taken them to *marhaban* events held in neighbouring houses. As they became teenagers, they no longer followed their mothers' singing pursuits and became more interested in other entertainment activities. In the following section, I discuss their musical preferences and the significance of music in their lives.

5.5.2 Participants' music consumption

Ida considered listening to music to be part of her leisure activities. She listened to songs to pass the time before going to bed. Ida's bedroom was considered her private space in which she could do her favourite things. As for Ain and Arina, they listened to music while studying. They found it helps to increase their level of concentration and self-confidence and thus helped them to finish their schoolwork. Zira preferred listening to ballads that she characterised as *lagu jiwang* (soul music). She stored several *lagu jiwang* tracks on her mobile phone and listened to them often.

Ida stated that one of the songs that can be described as *lagu jiwang* is 'Andai Aku Bersuara' (If Ever I Had Spoken) by Chomel, a singer/songwriter from Singapore. Even though Ida was a fan of *lagu jiwang*, she also enjoyed Pahang regional pop music, for instance, 'Ngape Bior Semok' (Why Let the Bush Grow) by Anok Semantan (discussed in Chapter 3), and the inspirational song, 'Semangat Tok Gajah' (The Spirit of Tok Gajah). Both songs are sung in the Pahang dialect.

Ida's thoughts on *lagu jiwang* matched those of Zira. For Zira, listening to *lagu jiwang* helped her to fully concentrate on creative writing. Besides helping her to concentrate, *lagu jiwang* also helped her to generate

ideas while writing. Among the songs that Zira listened to were ‘Memori Berkasih’ (Love Memory), ‘Permaisuri’ (Queen) and ‘Hajat’ (Wish) from the 1990s. Similarly Ain and Arina also found *lagu jiwang* pleasant-sounding and enjoyable.

All of the participants appreciated songs in the category of *irama Malaysia*. The development of the *irama Malaysia* genre began in the late 1990s. Ain, who wished to study music at university after she finished school, revealed that singing *irama Malaysia* songs was a useful way to train her singing voice. Ain was a big fan of the *irama Malaysia* singer Siti Nurhaliza and had memorized all her songs. Instead of listening to traditional songs, all four participants turned to *irama Malaysia* because of its modern sound. This is in accord with Malaysian composer Pak Ngah’s view that young people do not prefer traditional style songs; they prefer to hear modern sounds. Pak Ngah claims that young people listen to *irama Malaysia* which has an element of traditional music within it (Pak Ngah, personal communication, 8 December 2017).

All the participants had embraced mobile technology. Attractive and affordable Internet packages are available, which make virtual spaces increasingly accessible to them. With the Internet available on affordable devices that have downloading features, it is possible for these young women to save large amounts of music onto their devices. In the culture of the download era, the participants no longer need to buy music. Ida downloaded her favourite songs from unofficial websites and kept the songs in MP3 format on her mobile phone. She played songs while working and wore earphones to listen to them from her phone.

Streaming from premium music services such as YouTube and Spotify was also a common activity for the participants as it is easily accessible on a mobile phone. Zira and her friends distributed current popular songs among themselves and shared music files. This took place when they meet at their favourite food stall once a week. For this reason, buying new music in CD format at the market was considered unusual and expensive for the participants. Despite their focus on downloading and streaming music, these young women did not mind listening to music on the radio either.

All participants identified broadcast radio as one of their preferred ways to discover new music. Ida listened to her parents’ favourite radio programmes when she was at home and it was through her parents that Ida learnt old or traditional songs. Arina listened to the radio every Sunday

morning when she had *gotong-royong* (the spirit of working together) which involves the students clearing rubbish from the school dormitory area.

To conclude, what these young women listened to, what music they had easy access to and what was being projected by the media all affected their choice of music to some extent. All of the participants liked *lagu jiwang* and *irama Malaysia*. They frequently listened to their favourite tunes on several websites including YouTube and Spotify. In their era, downloading songs from websites is a common and more economical way of creating a collection of their favourite songs. In the following section, I review their musical activities at school.

5.5.3 Musical activities at school

All four young women provided accounts of their involvement with music when they were at school. Ida had an educational background in religious studies, and her description of musical activity at school was interesting. When I asked about her musical experiences when she attended religious school, Ida explained that her school had not offered music education, nor did it have a music teacher. Ida described her musical activity as only occurring when she spent time together with friends after school. On the other hand, Ain and Arina were actively involved in singing performances at their school to celebrate events including the Teacher's Day celebration on 16 May and the celebration of Eid-UI Fitr. Their repertoires were not limited to contemporary and popular songs, but also included traditional ones and they were part of a *nasyid* group at school. It is notable that Ain pointed out that singing at school had given her the opportunity to broaden her musical talents.

Although schools do not provide pupils with music as a subject, students are still able to learn music and organize musical activities after school. The School Department of the Malay Language initiated singing sessions every week at which school singers (boys and girls) can learn to sing the traditional poetry songs of *syair* and *nazam* as an extracurricular activity. Some schools also organize singing workshops a few times per year. During the course of my field study I attended a number of workshops, held at various schools in Pahang, that had the objective of promoting traditional poetry songs. One of them was held at Temerloh National Secondary School and was attended by about sixty teachers and students who benefited from the singing workshop. Furthermore, this kind of workshop is able to provide training for teachers and students before they represent their schools in *syair* singing

competitions. The singing workshops usually end with a concert held in the school hall at which professional musicians are invited to perform alongside the amateur musicians. The state government subsidizes these events to support the professional performers appearing at school concerts.

The school's music studio is the centre for organized musical activities – musical resources are stored here, musicians can gather and rehearse together, musical skills can be passed on and musical events are rehearsed for. For instance, the music studio at Abu Bakar Secondary School is where pupils and schoolteachers practise their instruments. Some musical instruments including a drum set, a conga, electric guitars and a keyboard are available to use for musically active pupils, who are predominantly male. Also available in the music studio is a karaoke set which is used as an educational tool for singing practice (Figure 5.8). The pupils can use all the equipment, but only under teacher supervision. Pupils who play musical instruments without the school administrator's permission are punished. In certain circumstances, the music studio is only permitted to be used by representatives of the school who are in need of intensive music or singing practice before attending a musical or singing competition. To maintain the condition of the music studio, it is locked most of the time and is only opened upon request.



Figure 5.8: Two pupils in their school attire practising karaoke singing in the music studio with their schoolteacher's supervision

During my visit to the school, I observed two students during a casual karaoke singing session in the music studio. They were practising traditional songs on karaoke VCDs played on DVD players and were singing through two

microphones plugged into a sound system. Near them was a box full of karaoke CDs mainly of Malay music, but also some of Indonesian music. Both students tried to imitate the original singers of the songs. The lyrics to the song floated across the bottom of the screen and changed colour as they were sung. Also in the music studio, there was a teacher seated behind a keyboard watching the activity. However, there was no direction or guidance from the teacher with regard to how the song, which had been selected by the students, should have been sung. They simply practised karaoke singing by imitating the sound and expression of the original singers.

To summarize, school musical activity is a display of musical expression and a performance in its own right. Young women participate in school-based musical activities and their performances are as valid as those performed by adults. I would argue that school involvement in music is one of the few paths to musical participation in the future. Of all the musical equipment provided in schools, the karaoke machine is the most popular. Through karaoke, young women can learn to sing traditional songs. Karaoke singing is not limited to performance in school, it is also available outside of school situations.

In the following section, I shall discuss young women's participation in karaoke singing activities in public spaces, including open-air restaurants.

5.5.4 Karaoke singing after school

Karaoke was one of the most popular leisure activities among the four young women. They considered themselves to be karaoke fans. They would go to a karaoke kiosk in a shopping complex or to open-air restaurants to enjoy karaoke singing after school or work. They had been attracted to karaoke singing because of the musical accompaniment which encouraged them to sing well and to experience the joy of singing. The following is a description of karaoke singing in a restaurant.

Karaoke takes place in restaurants usually from 8 pm until 12 am, except on Thursday nights in order to respect the ritual of the Qur'an reading held at the local mosque. Karaoke performances are generally located at the edge of a restaurant so that they can be observed by the audience, who are customers of the restaurant, but also by an audience from outside the restaurant, where the sound of the karaoke music can also be heard. Karaoke performances usually take place in the corner of the restaurant on a small stage

about twenty-five to thirty centimetres high with colourful neon/LED lights decorating the singing space.

There is a karaoke public address system set up for the customers who wish to sing. More than a thousand songs are listed and are mostly romantic in content. Young women mainly sing karaoke after dinner. After selecting a song, karaoke customers pay RM2 (GBP0.40) per song to the karaoke jockey before going to the stage. All the young women in this study sang karaoke once a week. I would argue that singing karaoke more than once per month is significantly related to listening to music they have downloaded from the Internet. They practised singing at home ready to perform for their friends at the restaurant.

From Ida's point of view, karaoke singing in a restaurant has several positive features when compared to the karaoke kiosk environment. Karaoke singing in a restaurant does not require a lot of money. Karaoke in a restaurant is livelier with a varied audience and people listening to other people's singing. Furthermore, karaoke singing in a restaurant is a good place to show off one's singing talents, and restaurant customers join in with singing during popular songs and well-known choruses. The audience of restaurant customers judges the quality of the singing and shows its approval through loud applause or cheering.

These young women went to restaurants accompanied by friends. Karaoke singing encourages young women's singing behaviour. For Ain, her favourite songs in karaoke were those of the *irama Malaysia* type, originally sung by popular female singers. She often chooses *irama Malaysia* songs, particularly because of their modern sound alongside the traditional. 'Cindai' (Silk Cloth), 'Ya Maulai' (Dear Lord) and 'Nazam Berkasih' (Quatrains of Love) were the songs that Ain sang every time she went to a restaurant. These songs have traditional music elements and strong links to the feelings associated with traditional music.

Arina did not limit herself to songs originally sung by female singers. She enjoyed singing songs which were initially sung by male singers and which suited her vocal range. Young women usually sing solo, but once in a while they will sing a duet with a good friend. Singing karaoke songs of the *irama Malaysia* genre offered these young women satisfaction as their singing was improved by having the original backing tracks as an accompaniment. In delivering *irama Malaysia* songs, ornamentation is frequently used and vibrato is required for every long note. However, a modern style is found in the dynamics of the singing and *irama Malaysia* songs require singing expression

techniques. The young women also stated that karaoke is useful for vocal training. Another essential point is that karaoke singing in restaurants helps young women to gain the self-confidence needed to participate in amateur singing contests.

In conclusion, karaoke singing is an amateur performance and has a big influence on the behaviours of non-professional singers, in this instance, young women. They happily imitate their favourite singers, who did not foresee the emergence of karaoke versions of their songs. Karaoke has a positive effect on young women's singing; it invites them to participate in the production of cultural expression and music.

5.6 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has highlighted the amateur women's singing groups that are associated with two Islamic songs, *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*, which take both oral and written forms and are linked to the creation of community through the music. From an Islamic perspective both songs have been adopted and respected. Women's singing groups have inherited their singing skills from the preceding generations. Participation in *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* is, for these women, principally a form of entertainment, and a way to fulfil personal, spiritual and community needs. The elderly women act as guardians of the songs. They are responsible for carrying the songs into the future and they continue to practise them as a way of preserving their cultural music. The visibility of the middle-aged and elderly women performing *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* is seen as an essential contribution to the cultural wealth of the Pahang Malays. Both songs remain privileged media of expression and provide an aesthetic culture dominated by middle-aged and elderly women. Musically speaking, *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* build the older community. It is through *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* that middle-aged and elderly women are allowed to comment on what is occurring in their local communities.

The Islamic forms of *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana* in Pahang villages are facing a decline in interest among younger people, even though they have been exposed to the songs from childhood through the rituals and ceremonies of religious life. This is due to multiple contemporary reasons. Young people may not really appreciate the songs as entertaining and would not include listening to or practising them in their leisure-time activities. Another aspect is that these songs may carry special metaphors and hidden

meanings in the original Arabic texts. This, therefore, demands a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical facts, something which is seen as an additional burden to young people.

However, the songs and their performance contribute to the creation of virtual communities on several media platforms. This is the best example of the movement of musical traditions from villages into cyberspace. Through new technology, the community can play an active role in recreating meanings and maintaining community through the songs. In other ways, technology and new media have made it possible for young women to engage in singing activities. They provide the tools for young women to practise and to experience singing activities. Karaoke is used in several contexts. The most well-known public place where young women can sing karaoke is in a restaurant. By singing karaoke, young women are able to experience singing to their ideal music, that is to say, *irama Malaysia*, which has a combination of traditional and modern elements. Through karaoke, the young women are motivated to give their best performances and also to improve their singing skills.

