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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i4/4061>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i4/4061

Received: 21 March 2018, Revised: 26 April 2018, Accepted: 29 April 2018

Published Online: 09 May 2018

In-Text Citation: (Agus et al., 2018)

To Cite this Article: Agus, Y. N., Mohamad, M. Z., Hisham, A., Yusof, S., Hasan, A. F., & Ghazali, A. B. (2018). The Contribution by Sufi Scholars towards Acehese Art and Culture. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 784–793.

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Vol. 8, No. 4, April 2018, Pg. 784 - 793

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The Contribution by Sufi Scholars towards Acehnese Art and Culture

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Abstract

Islam is a universal religion and a symbol of beauty that teaches a variety of aspects to its followers. One of the most important aspects and the heart of Islam is tasawuf (Sufism). Besides that, Sufism is capable of pacifying various turmoil that emerge in a human's life, including art, which is a work based on human instincts. Beauty is the manifestation of the Khaliq (the Creator), because Almighty Allah is all beautiful and loves beauty. This study discussed the terms of contribution by Sufi scholars towards Acehnese art and culture. The objective of this study was to clearly understand the contribution of Sufi scholars towards Acehnese art and culture. Generally, this study is qualitative in nature and used the documentation method to collect data. The findings showed that Sufi scholars had immensely contributed to Acehnese art and culture and this has been rooted in the lives of Acehnese society.

Keywords: Spiritual Music, Tasawuf Scholars, Art and Culture, Aceh

Introduction

Art is frequently interpreted differently, so much so that there are various arguments and versions. The basic general meaning used to understand art is beauty, expression of feelings, imagination etc. According to Sudjoko, quoting from an excerpt in American Heritage, absolute aspects that should be present in art are efficiency, intellect, personality, membership, skill and agility. Besides good behaviour, it also means true, proper, pretty and expensive. Art is something that is difficult to define holistically, just like knowledge or religion (Nanang, 2012).

According to Gazalba (1978), art or artistry is a manifestation of human culture that satisfies the criteria of aesthetics. The essence of art is the ability to create different forms of happiness, either in the art of literature, music, dancing, visual arts or even drama. Hence, arises the question, what is beauty? Or, what are aesthetic values? According to the Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences, beauty is stated as, "The believed capacity of any object to satisfy

a human desire. The quality of any object causes it to be of interest to an individual or of a group” (Asy’ari, 2007).

Next, evaluating something as good, not good or beautiful is common for someone to express based on what that someone sees. The branch of philosophy that discusses this matter is called the philosophy of art or generally known as aesthetics. In the life of a human, art is an important factor that exists in all aspects of life. Various forms of art are manifestations of feelings, wishes and works of humans. The beauty of art not only drives someone to express it in the form of poetry, songs, dance and paintings that are presented to fellow humans as proof of love or the awe of love, rather art is also capable of inducing religious experiences as a symbol of the love and wish to be always near to the Creator (Nuraini, 2012).

There also elements of art in Islam. Moreover, the al-Qu’ran, as a source of Islamic teachings, contains perfect values of art and is evaluated from an artistic perspective. A person who understands Arabic, either a Muslim or otherwise, would admit to the high level of artistic values in the al-Qur’an although it is not a work of art as exhorted by Almighty Allah, as follows:

“And We did not give Prophet Muhammad, knowledge of poetry, nor is it befitting for him. It is not but a message and a clear Qur'an” (Quran, Yasin: 69).

However, if we mention that Almighty Allah as being the Creator of art, then the al-Quran is the first work of art in Islam that provides a measure of beauty for Muslim art (al-Faruqi, 2014). This aspect is mentioned by Muslims as *i’jaz* or the strength that paralyzes. The al-Quran has challenged those who doubt it, which are the Arabs who have a level of artistry to produce something similar to the al-Quran. Almighty Allah exhorted;

“And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our Servant [Muhammad], then produce a surah the like thereof and call upon your witnesses other than Allah, if you should be truthful. (Quran, al-Baqarah: 23-24).

However, no one had accepted the challenge to create something similar to the al-Quran. Almighty Allah exhorted:

“Or do they say [about the Prophet], "He invented it?" Say, "Then bring forth a surah like it and call upon [for assistance] whomever you can besides Allah, if you should be truthful.” (Quran, Yunus: 38).

Seyyed H. Nasr had outlined the characteristics of Islamic art, whereby, “Islamic art is the product of the transformation of The All Mighty to diverse fields that refract the Monism of Almighty Allah, dependent on the variability of the All Mighty, the temporary nature of this world and the positive qualities that emerge due to the existence of this world or creatures, as exhorted by Almighty Allah in the al-Qur’an (Nanang, 2012). There are several indicators in the al-Qu’ran concerning the arts and artistry, such as;

“So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know (Quran, al-Rum: 30).

1. Almighty Allah has excellent features, as exhorted by Allah;

“And to Allah belong the best names, so invoke Him by them. And leave [the company of] those who practice deviation concerning His names. They will be recompensed for what they have been doing” (Quran, al-A’raf: 180).

Names that are associated with art are Jamal (Most Beautiful), Jalal (Most Powerful) and Kamal (Most Complete). By adhering to the two principles mentioned above, art is basically (according to Islam) permissible ((ja’iz) and neutral. Hence, art can become an instrument (wasilah) for achieving welfare (amal salih), and can also lead to destruction. Islam views art as a kind of worship, if initiated in an ethical framework (Asy’ari, 2007).

Besides that, the value of beauty is also mentioned in the Hadith of The Prophet PBUH, such as:

“One will not enter heaven if one possesses snobbery even as big as a mustard seed”. Then a person asked, how is it when one wears elegant cloths and sandals? “Verily, Allah is beautiful and loves beauty”. Snobbery dismisses the truth and belittles others” (Muslim, 2006).

In another hadith the Prophet Muhammad PBUH exhorted;

“Verily, Allah is The Best and favours goodness” (Muslim, 2006).

Since its early development, Islam had always used art for the various needs of Muslims and the whole realm. The verses of the al-Qur’an, poetry and the like have experienced development not paralleled in the history of humankind through the art of calligraphy or khat. So too the art of building mosques as a house of worship, which experienced rapid development all over the Islamic world. Similarly, literature, music and dance are also emphasised in the framework for Islamic preaching and culturization (Muhammad & Fadlin, 2007).

For example, Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan had commanded al-Hajjaj bin Yusuf al-Thaqafi, the Governor of Iraq at that time (75-95 AD), to provide a solution for the increasing instances of wrongful reciting of the al-Quran (al-’ujmah). Al-Hajjaj then chose Nahsr bin ‘Asim and Yahya bin Ya’mar for this mission as both of them were most in-the-know about language and qira’at. After several considerations, they both decided to rekindle the tradition of nuqath al-i’jam (addition of the ‘full-stop’ to differentiate the way of reading similar-shaped alphabets) in order to differentiate the ‘full-stop’ with the sign of harakat (nuqath al-i’rab.). As for the ‘full-stop’, it was given a colour similar to an alphabet, while for the sign of the harakat, it was red. This tradition was carried on until the time of the Umawiyah Caliphate.

Then came the time of the Abbasid Caliphate in 132AD. At that time, many creations had used colours for reading signs in the mushaf. In Madinah, they used black ink for alphabets and nuqath al-i'jam, and red ink for the harakat. In Andalusia, they used four colours, namely black for alphabets, red for harakat, yellow for hamzah, and green for hamzah al-wasl. Moreover, there was a part of the personal mushaf that used different colours to differentiate the types of i'rab of a word. But almost all agreed to use black ink for alphabets and nuqath al-i'jam, although the others used other colours.

At that moment, there emerged confusion on how to differentiate between the signs of nuqath al-i'rab and nuqath al-i'jam because it was similar in shape, which was round. Here, history had catered the role of Khalil bin Ahmad al-Farahidy (d.170AD). He then established the shape of fathah (upper line) with the small alif alphabet that was placed in a supine position above the alphabet, kasrah (bottom line) with the small ya' alphabet below it and dhammah (front row) with the small waw alphabet on top of it. Whereas, the tanwin was formed by doubling each writing sign. That was the development of the art of writing the al-Quran that continued until the present form of the al-Quran (Nasruddin, 2015).

Nasr concluded that Islamic art is tranquil, systematic, easily understood and has high spiritual values. Nasr also criticized a group of artists and Islamic historians who blindly followed Western scholars by neglecting Islamic spiritual art (Muhammad and Fadlin, 2007).

Literature Review

Ayu (2017), in his thesis entitled, "Pesan-Pesan Komunikasi Islam Dalam Tarian Tradisional Seudati Aceh (Semiotic Analysis)", had analysed how Islamic communication values found in Acehese Seudati poetry (verbal) are viewed from a Roland Barthes semiotic perspective.

Next, a similar argument was initiated by Aziz (2014) entitled "Sufism and the Art of Music: A Study on the Thinking of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali about Spiritual Music", which appeared in a journal. This study intended to explain the views of al-Ghazali regarding music and its relations with the spiritual life of humans by using a qualitative method. The study found that music, in al-Ghazali's view, was mystical and philosophical. It was mystical because his concept was the Sufi concept and philosophical because when he debated about music, he did it from a wide aspect. Since this study had focused on music according to only al-Ghazali's views; thus, the researcher had debated art in a general form and focused on contributions from Sufi scholars towards art and culture.

Karina (2014), in her thesis entitled "Analysis of the Structure of Music and the Socio-Cultural Function of Rapa'i Pasee in Biara Timu Jambo Aye, North Aceh, Province of Aceh", had intended to determine the existence of Rapa'i Pasee from previous times to its development at present, to explore the music structure according to dimensions of space and time during the presentation of Rapa'i Pasee as well as to determine the socio-cultural function of Rapa'i Pasee in the culture of the community that patronises it. The method used in this study was based on the qualitative method. Her study had focused on the structure of music and the socio-cultural function of Rapa'i

Pasee. Hence, the researcher intended to examine Acehese art and culture in a more general scope and the contributions of Sufi scholars towards Acehese art and culture.

Next, Manan (2012), in her work entitled, "Sufi Art in the Self-Approach to God and Its Implications on Islamic Psychotherapy", only focused on art used by Sufi followers to get closer to God and their involvement in Islamic Psychotherapy. Her study had used the qualitative method. The study found that the Sufi art method had an advantage in treating psychological stability issues among Muslims. However, her study was limited and did not touch on discussions that this study wanted to elaborate on.

Methodology of the Study

Basically, this study was qualitative in nature. Usually, a qualitative mode is used when the study focuses more on content and document analysis. This method could elaborate extensively on the history and contributions of Sufi scholars towards Acehese art and culture.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to identify and determine the contributions of Sufi scholars towards Acehese art and culture.

Discussion

The element of beauty found in art touches on the lives of these Sufi followers. We can clearly see how the daily lives of Sufi followers are filled with an attitude comprising beauty and artistic values. This is a pattern of life that is rarely seen in many Muslims. For the Sufi, every breath, every batting of the eyelid and every step taken is projected towards a norm that values worship and is implemented because they are motivated towards eschatology. The blessings of Almighty Allah are the ultimate aspiration of the Sufis. Allah, The Most Beautiful, and in order to pursue The Most Beautiful, humankind should be able to converse and act with a sense of beauty (Nuraini, 2012).

Hence, by realising the beauty and monotheism of Almighty Allah, several scholars have emerged in the Islamic world that has focused on art. In the art of music for example, al-Kindi (809-83M) and al-Farabi (d. 961M) had combined the musical concepts of the Greeks, Persians and the Arabs with stunning effect. Al-Farabi produced a theory about music that he wrote in the al-Musiqi al-Kabir scripture, which became a monumental work about the theory of music that was learned in the East and West. Similarly, Ibn Sina (980-1037AD) wrote about various fields of knowledge including music. Ziryab, an Islamic musician in the 19th century, worked in Spain and spread the knowledge about Islamic music to Baghdad. Meanwhile, Abd al-Qadir Ghaybi al-Maraghi (d. 1453AD), who emerged as a theorist and Islamic musician from Persia and later expanded his endeavours to Turkey by teaching Islamic musical theory there (Muhammad & Fadlin, 2007).

Then we get to know the art of Sufi dancing or also known as Whirling Dervishes by the West. This dance is a religious inspirational dance introduced by a famous Turkish poet named Jalal al-Din al-Rumi. The spiritual dance emerged since relations were forged between teacher

and pupil as well as between al-Rumi and his teacher Shams al-Din. This dance is a form of expressing the utmost love and affection from a subject to God. Al-Rumi was indeed a famous Sufi poet who was very productive and illustrious. One of his works was *Diwan-i Shamsi Tabriz*. This work was an expression of his love towards Shams al-Din Tabriz, who was his murabbi (tutor or guide) (Zayyin, 2011).

In the history of the propagation of Islam there are several languages that have been adopted as the 'Islamic language' by using a writing system based on the Arabic script, such as Persian, Turkish, Swahili (African origin), Urdu and Malay. Art is an effective instrument in the Islamic propagation process in various Islamic areas. Among these languages that are still in the Arabic script are Persian and Urdu besides Arabic, whereas Turkish, Swahili and Malay have adopted the Roman writing. This shows that the coming of Islam to numerous locations had not eradicated the local language but rather has integrated or adapted with the local culture (Hashim, 2005).

In Nusantara, the process of propagating and disseminating Islamic teachings cannot do without the media for preaching and one type of media is the art of poetry. Among the scholars who had used this type of media in Aceh was Syeikh Hamzah al-Fansuri. Poetry, as a form of media for preaching was popularised by Hamzah al-Fansuri as well as its contents on Sufi preaching, which is still well-known until today. The compatibility of poetry and the Sufi preaching formula is proven to be solid when propagating Sufi teachings. The Sufi teachings by Hamzah al-Fansuri were also famous around the Nusantara Archipelago. He is one of the more productive Sufi scholars and among the poetry he wrote were *Perahu*, *Sidang Fakir Empunya Kata*, *Syair Burung Pingai*, *Syair Ikan Tongkol*, *Syair Dagang*, *Syair Pungguk* (Mulyati, 2006).

The influence of Islam on art and culture in Aceh is very strong. Acehnese art basically contains moral characteristics that are demanded by Islamic teachings. This is because the domination of Islam is wide and deeply rooted in Acehnese society. Hence, it could be said that almost all Acehnese traditional works of art function as a media for preaching in that society (Cut, 2017).

The influence of Islam can be seen in Acehnese traditional dance, as in the Tari Saman. Some are of the view that the Tari Saman was developed by Syeikh Saman, a religious scholar in Gayo Luwes, the place where the dance originated. Before Islam arrived in the Gayo territories, the local community called it the Pok Ane game. After it was Islamised by Syeikh Saman, the local community replaced its name with Tari Saman. Thus, there were some who said that the dance was influenced by Tarekat Sammaniyah, which was developed by Syeikh Abd al-Karim al-Samani al-Madani (1720AD). This view, based on the character in the Tari Saman poetry, started with the word Hu and was voiced loudly and firmly. This is the identity of Tarekat Sammaniyah, which is the zikir besides *Lailah ha illallah* that uses the Zikir Hu (HE is Allah). Then, use of a loud and firm voice is exclusive to zikir in Rateeb Samman (the Acehnese call it Saman). Tari Saman is filled with Islamic moral teaching. In 2011, UNESCO had recognised Tari Saman as a world heritage culture (BBC Indonesia, 24 November: 2011).

When examined further, Tari Saman fulfils the aim and meaning of Islamic art because Islamic art is capable of expressing the beauty and concept of tauhid (monotheism) as the essence of aqidah (faith), code of values and Islamic norms, which is to convey the message of All Mighty God (Nanang, 2012).

Besides Tari Saman, the Aceh community had presumed the Rapa'i to be an art and cultural heritage that also functioned to convey Islamic teachings in the past. The introduction of the Rapa'i musical instrument into Aceh followed the introduction of Islam to Aceh, which then became a preaching media in the propagation of Islam during the reign of the first Islamic rule in Nusantara known as Samudera Pasai and ruled by Sultan Malik al-Saleh as its first Islamic Ruler in Pasai (Pase, Aceh Utara). Rapa'i then became a form of art that had a socio-cultural function during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The musical instrument called Rapa'i was brought by the religious scholars and Muslim merchants from the Middle East through their merchant roads around the world that ran through Central and South Asia crossing countries such as Pakistan, India and so forth. The name Rapa'i was taken from a famous religious scholar in Arab who created Islamic poetry accompanied by musical instruments (a type of rebana that was hit or tapped), which was later spread to followers of a Sufi movement called Rifa'iyah (Angga, 2014).

In the Islamic world, the growth of music in Islamic culture varies, such as Sufi music, music when learning religion or during ta'lim functions, and "Islami" music that has penetrated the entertainment world with Snada, Raihan and other nasyid groups. Based on its history, it could be said that music can be used by humans for various purposes; beginning as a medium for getting closer to God and later becoming a form of entertain with economic motives. Moreover, there are some who use music to solely satisfy their lust. According to Imam al-Ghazali, listening to music (sama') among the Sufi tends to stimulate feelings and eliminate depraved moral values. Hence, he did not deny the fact that there is music that could lead humans to vice (Abdul Aziz, 2014).

Next, the study examined how previous religious scholars in Aceh had used art for various purposes in order to obtain the blessings of Almighty Allah. One of the uses was to repel the colonizers who wanted to capture and colonize Aceh. Through Hikayat Prang Sabi (Tales from the Crusade), Teungku Chik Pante Kulu had succeeded in fanning the spirit of jihad among the people of Aceh. The verses in Hikayat Prang Sabi tell of how the Companions fought alongside the Prophet Muhammad PBUH in the War of Badar, reward for those who died in syahid, they fought the Dajjal (name given to the colonizers) and the great loss to Muslims who do not want to be a part of Jihad fi al-Sabilillah. The response by religious scholars, santri (pupils) and the Acehnese towards the work by Teungku Chik Pante Kulu was very obvious. They always read the work among themselves by lending a tune similar to Qasidah after their religious classes (Imran, 2008).

Art, as a universal language, is capable of becoming a medium for inviting humankind to do good (ma'ruf), preventing prohibited acts (munkar) as well as developing a lifestyle that is civilised and with high morals. Besides that, it can develop and grow fine values, beauty and truthfulness that lead to a balanced "material-spiritual" state (Nanang, 2012).

Conclusion

The Sufi scholars had played a big role in closely assessing all the creativity produced by society. One of this was art and culture. Art is one form of human instinct that is unstoppable as it expands and develops on its own. When analysing the phenomenon of art, the Sufi scholars did not immediately declare it as haram or defective. Rather, the Sufi scholars saw art as a medium that could be used for preaching and propagation of Islam. This element was given due consideration and attention by Sufi scholars who were propagating Islam in various areas. As during the early times of preaching Islam in Aceh, in particular, the Sufi scholars found various arts and culture thriving amongst the local population that either did or did not contradict the teachings of Islam. Thus, if the approach was not inappropriate, then the preaching of Islam there would not be successful. Hence, the Sufi scholars found a preaching method that was compromising and dialogue-oriented towards the arts that was expanding in Aceh besides also having incorporated the foundation or fundamentals of Islam. In relation to that, it is evident that the arts and culture inherited by the Aceh society today is an art and culture that has been Islamised or incorporated with elements of Islamic teachings and managed to eradicate the elements of polytheism.

Acknowledgement

Special appreciation is owed to Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Research Management, Innovation & Commercialization Centre (RMIC) UniSZA & Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE).

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