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To Randai or Not to Randai

Zainal Abd Latiff
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Randai, a folk art of the Minangkabau people, flourished as a theatrical form among migrants from West Sumatra in the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan in the 1960s but has nearly died out today. This article concerns efforts to revive interest in randai by the Malaysian government and concerned practitioners, including one of the co-authors, in recent decades. This revival has involved the Malaysianization of the art form.

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Randai is known as the folk theatre of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, Indonesia. Due to the nature of their merantau (“wander about”) spirit, the Minangkabau people have migrated to Malaysia and other parts of the world. In Malaysia, one of the states where they are found is Negeri Sembilan, and a traditional performing arts they have brought is randai. This article will examine the relationship between randai, the traditional Minangkabau society of Negeri Sembilan, and modern Malaysia.

Randai is not actively performed in Negeri Sembilan, where it is a dying art. There are several groups performing the randai dance
(the precursor form of the theatre), but not randai theatre itself. Beginning in the 1990s there were efforts to revive the randai theatre by the Ministry of Culture and individuals like Masdar Aziz (better known as Pak Pen) and Zainal Abd Latiff—one of the authors of this article. This endeavor has encountered some resistance. Some express a concern that randai should be preserved only in its original form, the Indonesian one that is found in Padang, West Sumatra. These preservationists tend to be from the oldest generation of immigrants, who are now more than sixty years old. Others (typically younger people) argue that randai should be transformed to suit the local needs of Negeri Sembilan. Those in the middle want to have the best of both worlds, combining the old and new, rather than demanding the “complete overhaul” of randai called for by the young as needed in order for them to identify with the art.

This article, based on ongoing research, will deal with Malaysian randai in comparison with Minang randai of Indonesia and look into how this art form in one locality of Southeast Asia is diffused and transplanted as a result of migration. The discussion will revolve mainly around the status and transformation of randai in Negeri Sembilan and in Malaysia generally. We, as authors, query why a highly valued theatrical tradition is not upheld as a proud heritage of the Negeri Sembilan community and note steps taken by the Ministry of Culture and staff at the Cultural Centre of University of Malaya to revive and sustain randai in Malaysia.

The Minang People in Malaysia

Migration of the Minangkabau people to Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia was said to have happened in stages and can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Journey Malaysia n.d.). Minang settlement was made possible by the protection of the Malaccan sultanate. According to the Portuguese historian Manuel Godinho de Erédia, writing in 1613, the Minangkabau people living in Naning were mostly involved in agriculture in Malacca.

In the premodern period, rulers of the Malay states were constantly fighting. The overthrow of the Malaccan sultanate by the Bugis sultanate led to insurrections in the districts of Rembau, Sungei Ujong, Johol, and Ulu Muar in 1770. Amid the chaos, the people in this region solicited the royal house of Pagar Ruyong in their Sumatran homeland to rule them. Sultan Abdul Jalil, the ruler of Pagar Ruyung, appointed his son, Raja Melewar, as his delegate in Negeri Sembilan, and in 1773 Raja Melewar was proclaimed as the first Yang Dipertuan Besar (Great Leader/Ruler) of Negeri Sembilan. After the appointment, the influx of Minangkabau immigrants from various Sumatran districts brought
social and political changes in the local community as a result of cross-
mariages between locals and Minang migrants. The Minangkabau
influence was further strengthened when Britain colonized Malaya in
the late nineteenth century (Alred, Byram, and Fleming 2006). The
proliferating tin mining industry propelled British intervention into
the local power conflicts with unrest in the small states of Sungei Ujong,
Rembau, and Jelebu. British treaties united these small states under the
sole sovereignty of Yamtuan Seri Menanti (Lord of Seri Mananti) in
1889. This dynasty exists up to this day. This consolidation facilitated
further migration from West Sumatra to Negeri Sembilan and other
states of current-day Malaysia.

Randai in Crisis

Randai is a traditional theatre and folk art of the Minangkabau
ethnic group that incorporates music, singing, storytelling, dancing,
martial arts, and acting. There are at least three possible origins of
randai. The first theory states that it originated from the mourning
dance of tari ilau (memorial dance for the deceased, which some claim
is linked to a dance ritual for contact with spirits called dampeang), the
second theory derives randai from the storytelling activity of bakaba,
and the third theory claims that it evolved out of the martial art of silat
(Pauka 1998: 16–18). Randai is performed in a circular formation. The
various moves and steps in randai are born out of the motions evident
in nature, such as strong waves crashing on the seashore or the undu-
lating sway of rice plants across a vast paddy. The word randai itself is
said to derive from andai or handai, which means to communicate with
one another with intimacy through the use of rhythmic words filled
with allegories and metaphors (Tanjung n.d.).

Any randai group will have an older or experienced figure
appointed to lead. Commonly this figure is known as pangkatuo randai
(“randai elder/headman”). The leader assists in orchestrating the mar-
tial silat moves of the circular dancing and also in deciding the kaba
(local narratives, folktales) for the story line in the randai performance.
Drama is an important element in randai, incorporated in the 1930s
under the influence of komedi stambul or bangsawan, the popular and
commercial traveling troupes of Malay opera from Malaysia and Java
(Cohen 2003). The attire for the performers is akin to the silat martial
arts outfit. However, randai performers wear more colors compared to
the all-black silat attire. The top is usually loose and buttonless, and has
big sleeves. The pants (serawa galembong) are baggy to enable the vigor-
ous movements of the performers, who may use the fabric as they are
taught as an impromptu “drum.” A maroon sarong is loosely draped
on top of the pants, and the destar (turban/headdress) is embellished
with beads or batik designs (Tanjung n.d.). The talempong (kettle gong) ensemble that accompanies plays also includes gendang katindiek (double-headed drum), adok (a single-headed drum), rebana (small single-headed hand drum), and puput or serunai (an oboe-like instrument). Music is sometimes rounded out by pupuk batang padi (a reed instrument) and saluang (a bamboo flute) or rebab (bowed string instrument). There are no fixed rules or tasks for each member of a randai group, because values such as respect, comradeship, and affection are emphasized over protocol. The number of players or anak-anak randai (literally, “randai children”) in a group could reach sixteen people, depending on the needs of a story line.

Every state in Malaysia possesses its own traditional Malay performance genre. In the state of Kelantan, mak yong (a Malay dance-drama) is highlighted; Perlis is known for awang batil (storytelling); Penang for boria performances (dance and comic sketches); Melaka for dondang sayang singing; and Johor for the zapin, a Middle Eastern-inspired dance (Ghulam-Sawar 2004). Some of these arts have been heavily promoted by the state at the local, national, and international level. Mak yong, for example, has received support from the Ministry of Culture, especially after UNESCO declared it as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005. Bangsawan was revived under government sponsorship in the 1970s (Tan 1993), and, since 2000, bangsawan performances are staged each year at the Panggung Bandaraya (Town Hall Theatre) in Kuala Lumpur. As a result of this government backing, mak yong and bangsawan are well known, if not popular, throughout Malaysia. Randai has lacked such governmental support. Even at the local level, government cultural officers generally show little interest in reviving or promoting randai. Unlike their colleagues in some other states, Negri Sembilan officers do not undertake initiatives to promote the state’s culture or submit proposals to gain the attention of the ministry; they are content to receive instructions from the top. Randai, as a result, is scarcely acknowledged as a beacon of Negeri Sembilan’s traditional art. Knowledge of randai is localized. It is known and performed among the Minang communities but largely unknown to Malaysians outside of Negeri Sembilan.

Oral reports indicate that randai was a thriving art form in the 1960s and performed in and by the Minang communities in the districts of Jelebu, Beranang, Lenggeng, Rembau, and Seremban. These groups were self-sustaining and supported by the older generation. However, the situation has altered with Malaysia’s drive to modernization, and today there is not a single randai group that is readily available for a full theatrical performance. When a need arises for the rare randai performance, whether for a celebration, a welcoming ceremony, or
a wedding reception, it is necessary to round up actors and musicians from around the state to rehearse them for a specific performance. *Randai* thus might fairly be called a dying art form in Negeri Sembilan. There are several factors that contribute to *randai*’s sad situation. First, the Negeri Sembilan community appears reluctant to associate themselves with their Minangkabau heritage and traditions. The younger generations are comfortable in acknowledging themselves as Malaysian citizens or *orang Melayu Negeri* (Negeri Sembilan Malays), but not as *orang Minangkabau* (Minangs), in part because they do not speak the Minang language. Second, leaders of *randai* groups have traditionally been from the lower-income groups, and thus *randai* as an art form lacked prestige. For example, Pak Jantan from Kampung Gagu is a retired postman and now raises buffaloes for his living. Kamarul from Seremban is a freelance musician and runs a small business. Pak Pen from Beranang operates a small restaurant. The low income of these artistic leaders means that they are not regarded with real reverence. They can barely survive and are unable to depend on performing *randai* as a major source of income. This means that they can only afford to perform *randai* on a part-time basis and only practice whenever they are commissioned to perform. Therefore it is nearly impossible to be able to sustain a *randai* group. Third, the lack of influential figures or patrons prevents *randai* from flourishing. Fourth, most Malaysians, including many in Negeri Sembilan, find it hard to understand the Minang language used in *randai* and fail to appreciate the Minang songs. Last, Malaysian arts activists and theatre researchers have minimal understanding of or interest in *randai*, as it is deemed to be a theatre tradition of Indonesia, particularly the West Sumatran district. Malays do not wish to pick a quarrel with their Indonesian counterparts of the sort that has been expressed when Malaysians have claimed certain common cultural items like *batik*, *silat*, *keris* (dagger), and *tari endang* (a dance form).4

**Reviving Randai**

A festival in the form of a workshop known as Perkampungan Randai 84 (*Randai Community 84*) was held in Cheras, Selangor, Malaysia on 26–27 March 1984. This *randai* workshop was the fourth in the Arts Appreciation series, a celebration of traditional performance forms initiated in 1983 by the National Cultural Complex, the creative division of the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports. The other performance genres chosen were the court dance of *joget gamelan* from Terengganu; the shadow puppet theatre of *wayang purwa* and pageant forms of *kuda kepang* (‘horse’ dance) and *barongan* from Johor; and the storytelling of *awang batil* and the court dance of *terinai* from the
state of Perlis. This 1984 randai festival was the first event in which randai caught the attention of Malaysian theatre scholars and critics. The Cheras workshop invited six randai groups, four from Negeri Sembilan and two from Selangor, exhibiting at least three differing versions of randai in the analysis of Krishen Jit (cf. Mohd. Anis 1986). Therefore, the question that was asked was, Which was the real randai? There was no satisfactory answer. What was deemed “real” depended on who was answering the question, though a more useful approach would have been to investigate the condition of randai as practiced in Malaysia.

Subsequently several randai groups, among them one from the arts academy Institute Seni Indonesia (ISI, Indonesian Institute of the Arts) in Padangpanjang, Sumatra, came to Malaysia to perform in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Sporadic initiatives were also launched by the Department of Culture of Negeri Sembilan, which invited randai teachers from Padang to conduct workshops for the locals in the state. But workshops lasting a few days were not able to create interest and sustain randai performance in Negeri Sembilan.

Zainal Abd Latiff began his journey adapting traditional randai of Padang to an evolved form of “Malaysianized” randai at this time and helped rekindle interest in the genre. The author has been a martial arts silat practitioner since 1964 and devised his own method of training performers based on silat techniques. He had been searching for a silat-based theatrical form that could be a platform for experimental and physical theatre. He found randai suitable, conducting systematic research on randai in 2003 at the School of Arts at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. Under the UMITG (Universities of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand) program, he studied the traditional performing arts of Sumatra and Malaysia. He found in Negeri Sembilan that groups in the 1990s had dissolved except for a group in Kampung Gagu, a remote district of Jelebu. This group was composed of schoolchildren who performed the circular gelombang dance of randai, rather than the full theatrical version (see Fig. 1). Even this dancing was seldom performed, except for celebration of Independence Day and the like.

In a concerned effort to revive the randai tradition, Zainal wrote a letter to Dato’ Seri Dr. Rais Yatim, a Minang of West Sumatran descent, who was then the minister of culture. The minister responded positively by inviting Zainal to his office to discuss randai and was surprised to learn his interest in randai was through its close linkage with silat, rather than personal heritage (Zainal is from Sarawak and has no Minang blood). The minister asked him to develop a working paper on a plan to restore randai in Negeri Sembilan.

In the proposal the following steps were suggested to revive and sustain randai:
1. The first phase would be to set up a research and documentation center as a place for planning work and collecting materials, documents, and recordings of *randai*—a one-stop center for students, scholars, and practitioners.

2. The second phase would be to a major performance of *randai* at the national theatre (Istana Budaya) in Kuala Lumpur, using a local legend and accompanied by a full orchestra. Text would be in the Malay language to be appreciated by the Malaysian audience.

3. The performance troupe would then tour to introduce *randai* to the people of Malaysia.

4. The next phase would be to promote *randai* at the societal level. *Randai* should be introduced in Malaysian universities, colleges, and then schools.\(^5\)

5. Finally, the ministry could plan a *randai* festival or an international seminar on *randai*.

The minister suggested that Zainal direct a *randai* performance at ASWARA, the nationally supported arts academy in Kuala Lumpur, by the end of the year. Kirstin Pauka at the University of Hawai‘i was rehearsing a *randai* play in English titled *Luck and Loss: Manadin’s*

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**Figure 1.** A chorus of dancers performing the circular *gelombang* dance in a *randai* performance in Beranang, Negeri Sembilan, in 2011. (Photo: Latimin Keman)
Gamble (Magek Menandin) for a performance in January 2006; a ten-
day stay in Hawai‘i helped Zainal gain insight as to how Pauka and her
students handled the randai production and adjusted the form to suit their English-speaking audience (see also Pauka et al. 2003).

Following exposure to the Hawaiian model, the author asked randai instructor Pak Afrizal, whom he had met during research in Padang, to come to Kuala Lumpur to assist in the ASWARA production. With the minister’s blessing, the first randai performance was produced in 2005. The play was Puti Nilam Sari, based on a script by Padang-born Wisran Hadi, who was then teaching at ASWARA (see Dayang Noor Aldurrah Zainal’s discussion [2005]). Only three weeks of daily six-hour rehearsals were possible. Within this short period, it was not possible to do a thorough revision of randai, as originally envis-
egaged. Instead the production effectively replicated the processes of traditional randai production. The only adaptations were altering Wisran Hadi’s dialogue to Negeri Sembilan dialect and directing the actors so that their performance was believable. The company, composed of ASWARA students, were drilled in silat moves, singing, and acting. The music department helped with accompaniment.

The production played to a full house for three nights (21–23 December 2005) at the Experimental Theatre of ASWARA. The Negeri Sembilan dialect was opted for over the less generally comprehensible Minang. Since randai existed in Negeri Sembilan, this dialect would make more sense to Malaysian audiences. Some at ASWARA had qualms, feeling the minister would find this “less authentic.” But this choice met with laudatory feedback from the minister, who suggested that the author direct another randai play the following year.

The minister requested a famous folk tale called Sabai nan Aluih, or Genteel Sabai. As before, preparations were restricted by the short period of only four weeks to rehearse—by contrast, Pauka at the University of Hawai‘i takes six months. The Minang script was translated to the Malay language, as students participating came from all over Malaysia (Perlis, Penang, Selangor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Sarawak, and Sabah) and they were not equipped to quickly adopt the Negeri dialect. There was also a Chinese student, staff members Kamaruddin (now deputy director of student affairs), Joseph Gonzales (dean of the Dance Department), and Balqis Omar (theatre lecturer). The play was performed over three consecutive nights, and the response was excellent. Almost all viewers said this was their first time watching a live performance of randai. There were polarized reactions in terms of the use of the Malay language, some supporting and others not. Some recom-
mended that the group tour the country to promote randai and make the form better known in Malaysia.
In addition to its revival at ASWARA, randai has also been performed at the Cultural Centre of the University of Malaya (CCUM; see Fig. 2) beginning in 2000 under the guidance of Pak Zulkifli, a staff member of the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Padangpanjang, who was invited by the vice chancellor of student affairs of the University of Malaya to introduce randai. A creative and innovative dancer, “Pak Zul” is known for his liberal attitude in adapting randai to make it relevant to today’s generation of performers. With Mohd. Effendi Samsuddin and his disciple Ramzi, Pak Zul produced Tragedi Tun Hamzah (Tragedy of Tun Hamzah), about a legendary Malay warrior. Pak Zul kept the performance structure and the silat movements, but introduced a play depicting a Malay (not Sumatran) figure, using Malay dialogue, dendang (song), and costumes.

The second randai production at CCUM was directed by Mohd. Effendi Samsuddin in 2011. He chose a play adapted from the classic Malay-language film Tunang Pak Dukun (The Healer’s Fiancée, Cathay-Keris, 1960). Keeping the performance structure and the gelombang dance, Mohd. Effendi scripted the play in Malay, employed Malay songs, and had part of a house appear in the set (traditional randai has no built scenery). (See Fig. 3.)

Figure 2. Students of the University of Malaya’s drama department rehearsing for a randai performance at the university’s Experimental Theatre in 2012. (Photo: Latimin Keman)
The latest CCUM randai production was staged as a thirty-minute lunch theatre performance on 22 December 2012, to celebrate a wedding. Among the audience was Negeri Sembilan’s hereditary ruler, Yang di Pertuan Tuanku Mukhriz. The drama acted out the scene of two people lost while trying to reach a wedding ceremony. This production differed from traditional randai in its story line, dialogue, and songs, and, unusually, used a cow’s head as a prop.

The trend across all these productions is to “Malaysianize” randai. Stories increasingly are not from the kaba folktale repertoire of the Minangkabau, but from Malay legends. Dialogue, songs, and costumes are increasingly Malay in derivation. Martial arts movements are often from the Malay silat styles of gayong fatani and gayong pusaka, rather than the Minang silek (martial) styles of kumango, tuo, or ulu ambek. The Malay keris replaces the Minang dagger. Patronage comes not from communities in Negeri Sembilan but via compulsory courses in theatre training in Kuala Lumpur at ASWARA and CCUM, and will soon be offered at arts schools in Johor and Kuching in Sarawak. There are signs that randai might be returning to Negeri Sembilan. The Department of Culture of Negeri Sembilan has recently undertaken an initiative to sponsor periodic randai performances under the leadership of a pangkatuo randai master from Padang.
Randai on Global Stages

From the above discussion, it is apparent that changes have been made in order for randai to become relevant to Malaysian audiences. Randai has previously been modified for audiences in Hawai‘i by Pauka and in Brisbane, Australia, by Indija Mahjoeddin. But the level of their adaptations differs. Pauka has tried to closely follow randai in West Sumatra, while translating dialogue to English and using the University of Hawai‘i’s mainstage space.

In contrast, Indija Mahjoeddin created a hybrid form. Stories, songs, movements, and musical instrumentation change. Indija boldly incorporates Western elements in her use of theatrical spaces, lighting, sets, and costumes. She does not typically use kaba source stories, but has staged instead The Ballad of Boldenblee (2004), in which a heroine takes on an evil property developer, and The Butterfly Seer (2006), a philosophical tale of a prophetess on a journey across the Arabian Sea and a clown. Indija uses hip hop freestyle to deliver dialogue. This move toward Australian neo-randai (Cohen 2003) perhaps takes guidance from Chairul Harun (1992) that good randai dialogue must be different from daily speech. Indija takes different approaches to music, usually commissioning original compositions rather than using the classical randai folk tunes.

In Malaysia, as internationally, we have negotiated the Malaysian context. Malaysians of West Sumatran descent distance themselves from Minang culture, so randai is performed largely by non-Minang heritage performers who emphasize theatrical aspects of the genre rather than its Minang-ness.

In conclusion, for randai to survive in Malaysia it must not be circumscribed to the original Sumatran form. Randai has to adapt to the taste of Malaysians to reach wider audiences. In this manner, randai can gradually gain recognition and be sustainable. The art is malleable; thus, randai is being performed in Hawai‘i, Australia, and Malaysia. Hasnawi, a folk artist from Padang, commented: “Changes are the bridges and a part of the growth of randai. Every change is like a seed, it will grow.”

NOTES

1. The research for this report included library study, fieldwork, participation observation, interviews, and analysis of audio and video recordings. This immersion strategy involved three stages: (1) Analysis of printed and multimedia materials; (2) interviews with significant figures and theatre activists in Negeri Sembilan, such as Mazgar Ali (aka Pak Pen), En. Kamarul, and En.
and (3) attendance at a randai festival in Solok, West Sumatra, on 2–8 September 2012 with fourteen groups from Padangpanjang, Payakumbuh, Tanah Datar, Kota Padang, and Ajam competing, including well-known groups like Pelito Nyalo, Rimbun Serumpun, and Indojati. The discussion of differences between Sumatran and Malaysian randai are based mainly on the performances seen at Solok and performances by students of the National Academy of Arts (formerly ASK, now known as ASWARA) and the Cultural Centre of University of Malaya, both in Kuala Lumpur, and analysis of visual and audio recording of randai performances.

2. The name Negeri Sembilan means the Land of Nine States. The name Negeri itself was said by historians to have originated from the Minangkabau language. It implies a small district that is ruled. Negeri Sembilan was originally occupied by three indigenous tribes: the Biduanda, Bersisi, and Jakun. For information on Minang culture and history see Ibrahim (2009) and Edison and Nasrun (2010).

3. Randai has sometimes been called an arena theatre. Richard Schechner, a prominent professor of performance studies, scoured the Americas and India for exemplary arena theatre models. Randai is the only Malay art that is performed in a circle arrangement—an arena space.

4. The Sumatran tor-tor dance and gordang sambilang music have been recognized as national Malaysian heritage by the government. These forms originate from the Mandiliang people who migrated to Malaysia (MacVay 2012). The short depiction of pendet dance from Bali in a Malaysian tourism campaign video resulted in much dissatisfaction. Indonesians saw this celebration of diversity and common heritage as outright plagiarism (Chong 2012).

5. In this context, randai is a course at the National Academy of the Arts (ASWARA), and in an art school (sekolah seni) in Sarawak. The Ministry of Culture is also in the process of developing a module on randai to be introduced to state schools.

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