



Unveiling the Forgotten Stage: Form, Function, and Cultural Negotiation in the Performing Arts of *Teater Abdul Muluk*, Jambi

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Submitted: November 11, 2025. Revised: January 16, 2026. Accepted: July 3, 2026

Abstract

Teater Abdul Muluk (TAM) in Jambi remains under-researched in academic discourse despite its enduring practice and sustained preservation by local communities. Unlike Malay theatre in other regions, which has a well-established historiography and receives institutional support, TAM is often regarded as a marginal form within performing arts discourse. This research aims to re-examine this position by interpreting TAM as an active, reflective, and contextual cultural practice, a field for the production of meaning and cultural authority outside canonical centers. This study employs a critical ethnographic approach through performance documentation, in-depth interviews with multi-generational practitioners, and an analysis of performative elements, including staging structures, characterization, props, and music. The findings indicate that the continuity of TAM relies on performative negotiations that converge Malay customs, Islamic ethics, humor, and colonial memory, rather than the mere textual reproduction of the *Syair Abdul Muluk*. A key finding is the utilization of minimalist props, specifically the table and rattan, which serve as symbolic control centers to regulate authority, sound, the actors' bodies, and the dramatic flow. These props establish a distinct performative character that defines Malay theater expression in Jambi. This article provides an empirical and methodological foundation for further research to uncover the dynamics of Malay theater practices in regions that have historically been underrepresented in the historiography of the performing arts.

Keywords: theater Abdul Muluk; Malay theatre; critical ethnography; performative practice; symbolic authority

How to Cite: Akbar, O., Widodo, S. T., & Rohmadi, M. (2026). Unveiling the Forgotten Stage: Form, Function, and Cultural Negotiation in the Performing Arts of Teater Abdul Muluk, Jambi. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, 26(1), 79-94

INTRODUCTION

Malay theatre has undergone various transformations shaped by encounters with modernity, colonial influence, religion, and local cultural traditions. Although these transformations have not occurred uniformly, they have resulted in diverse regional forms that reflect different his-

torical trajectories, power relations, and processes of cultural negotiation. In Jambi, this legacy of transformation is manifested in *Teater Abdul Muluk* (TAM), a local adaptation rooted in the classical Malay literary heritage of *Syair Abdul Muluk*. Historical records indicate that TAM had developed before Indonesia's independence (Mulyani & Yanto, 2020). The existence of TAM

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demonstrates that Jambi functions not as a passive recipient, but as an active site for the circulation and reinterpretation of Malay theatre.

Despite its historical presence, TAM remains absent from academic discourse. This absence constitutes both an empirical gap and a theoretical problem in the study of Malay theatre. By prioritizing established cultural centers such as Palembang, Riau, and South Kalimantan, existing studies implicitly construct a linear and hierarchical narrative in which regions like Jambi appear as peripheral recipients rather than as sites of cultural production. Such imbalance risks reproducing distorted historiography (Lundén, 2024), which renders processes of hybridity, localization, and creative negotiation unseen. Therefore, researching TAM aims to recalibrate the analytical framework of Malay theatre by highlighting how theatrical forms are actively reprocessed in regions considered marginal through local history, religious sensibility, and community-based creativity.

This research adopts a critical ethnography approach. Instead of treating TAM as a static remnant of tradition, this study approaches it as a cultural practice embedded in the negotiation of power, memory, and authority. Its critical dimension lies in questioning why certain Malay theatrical forms are recognized while others remain undocumented, and how local practitioners articulate continuity, legitimacy, and relevance without institutional recognition. This critical perspective is operationalized through the analysis of performance structure, gender-based characterization, humor and improvisation, the symbolic nature of the stage, and the social functions through which TAM negotiates religious values, Malay customs, and local authority.

Historically, Malay theatre evolved towards modern performance forms through its encounters with Western theatrical conventions during the colonial period, giving birth to *Bangsawan*. Characterized by episodic narratives, didactic

plotlines, a combination of comedy, melodrama, and serious scenes, the absence of a fixed script, and the integration of music, dance, and dialogue, *Bangsawan* functioned as a popular, commercial, and multi-ethnic form of entertainment throughout the Malay world (Brandon, 1967; Suboh, 2023; Tan, 1989). Interestingly, the transformation of Malay theatre did not erase its moral and literary foundation, which remained heavily influenced by religious values and Malay customs.

Bangsawan's adaptability is evident in its various regional manifestations across Southeast Asia, known by different names such as *Indera Bangsawan*, *Komedi Stamboel*, *Dul Muluk*, *Mamanda*, *Sandiwara*, and *Opera Melayu*. These variations should not be understood as fragmentation but as expressions of a shared cultural grammar constantly reinterpreted in response to local social contexts, as reflected in recurring narrative patterns, performance structures, and symbolic qualities (Bandem & Murgiyanto, 1996; Kleden-Probonegoro, 2010). Although studies on *Mak Yong* in Riau (Darmawan, 2023), *Dul Muluk* in Palembang, also recorded in Solok, West Sumatra (Handayani & Murtana, 2018; Nurhayati et al., 2022; Pramayoza, 2016) make-up, hair style, gerak dan nada yang menyerupai perempuan. Tunas Harapan dalam menampilkan tokoh perempuan melalui aktor laki-laki memiliki simbol-simbol kebudayaan yang disampaikan melalui tokoh perempuan. (2, and *Mamanda* in South Kalimantan (Tan, 1993) have significantly advanced the understanding of Malay theatre; these studies have largely centered on established cultural hubs, leaving Jambi underrepresented.

Given Jambi's strategic position along the east coast of Sumatra as a historical corridor for trade, cultural exchange, and the transmission of Islam (Nur, 2018) The lack of academic documentation and analysis of Malay theatre in Jambi is a problematic issue. This limits scholarly understanding, hindering cultural preservation initiatives and policymaking related to intangible cultural heritage.

This research does not provide a comparative analysis of Malay theatre traditions. Instead, it represents an initial effort to position TAM by examining its form and function as a representation of Jambi Malay theatre. The analysis of form focuses on the relationships between performance elements as a semiotic system (Pavis, 1998), while the dramatic structure is examined through the integration of plot, character, theme, genre, and style (Letwin et al., 2008). The analysis of function explores the symbolic meanings and social values that reflect the community's worldview (Geertz, 1973). Through a critical ethnographic approach, this research investigates how TAM negotiates among religious values, Malay customs, and local creativity as an active cultural practice rather than a residual tradition.

The novelty of this research lies in providing the first systematic documentation and analysis of TAM based on two surviving theatre groups, *Mekar Kembali* and *Sereh Serumpun*. In addition to filling an empirical gap, this study addresses the imbalance in Malay theatre studies by reconstructing a missing link in its regional historiography.

Documentation is positioned as both a reflective and a political act to counter the erasure of regional performance knowledge, especially considering the transient nature of performance that can never be identically repeated. Documentation will serve as an archive that records traces of past experiences and then mediates them into the context of present knowledge (Levy, 2001), as well as bridging performance events with the analysis of creative process, dramatic structure, and social meaning (Beng & Shafii, 2021). While video technology expands the possibilities for visual archiving (McAuley, 1994), the archive, understood as partial and interpretative, encompasses both material and non-material traces of performance practice (Jones et al., 2009).

From a global perspective, innovative approaches to folk theatre continues to emerge, including contextual revitalization through engagement with modern per-

formance forms (Chen, 2021; Shi, 2019) and the integration of new technologies and digital platforms (Cohen, 2019; Du, 2024; Meloni & Allasso, 2023; Wang & Moon-suwa, 2024). However, innovation requires a healthy ecosystem involving artists, audiences, educational institutions, and governments (Anoeграjekti et al., 2024; Rybalko & Ivina, 2017; Sarmiento-Mateos et al., 2019; Tsivolas, 2019). In the case of TAM, innovation cannot proceed without fundamental academic documentation.

TAM in Jambi has not yet received scientific attention comparable to *Mak Yong*, *Dul Muluk*, and *Mamanda*. By applying critical ethnography, this research makes a methodological contribution to the context of Malay theatre. This study encourages TAM to be systematically recorded and recognized in the history and development of Malay theatre. This effort can foster a more balanced understanding of the diversity of Malay theatre in the Indonesian archipelago.

METHOD

This research employs critical ethnography (Madison, 2020) to examine TAM as a marginal yet actively negotiated form of Malay folk theatre in Jambi. Fieldwork was conducted for sixteen weeks (May–August 2025) in two locations along the Batanghari River: Semubuk Village, the base of *Mekar Kembali*, and Muara Jambi Village, the base of *Sereh Serumpun*. These locations were chosen to represent contrasting sustainability conditions. *Sereh Serumpun* remains active, while *Mekar Kembali* ceased routine performances about two decades ago. *Mekar Kembali*'s vacuum was due to a drastic drop in performance requests and a failure in regeneration. This contrasting condition opens up space for analysis of ongoing practices and practices that persist in collective memory.

Data were collected through performance documentation, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. The reconstructed TAM performance was documented at the Arena Theatre, Jambi

Cultural Park, using a single static camera to minimize intervention. In-depth interviews (three to four hours per participant) were conducted with group leaders, senior performers, young practitioners, and cultural facilitators, who were intentionally selected based on cultural authority and experience-based knowledge.

To maintain ethical integrity, all names are anonymized using initials. From *Mekar Kembali*, the informants included I (77 years old), the director and group leader; Y (75 years old), a senior performer; and A (28 years old), a young performer representing the current generation. From *Sereh Serumpun*, the informants included S (76 years old), a maestro and senior performer; B (54 years old), a group leader; and MHD (41 years old) and AH (47 years old), young performers and cultural movers. Additional informants were obtained from a cultural elder (MH, 75 years old) and four senior performers from neighboring villages (aged 73–77) who had previously participated in TAM performances. This multi-generational composition allowed the research to capture continuity and transformation in TAM practices.

Data analysis followed a spiral model (Creswell, 2018). Interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly read to develop a holistic understanding, followed by inductive manual coding to identify recurring categories. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, including historical formation, performance structure, symbolic staging, gender embodiment, humor as social and colonial critique, Islamic ethics, and institutional marginalization as a cultural power relation. Divergent narratives were treated not as inconsistencies, but as expressions of oral history and collective memory.

Data credibility was strengthened through triangulation across informants, data collection techniques, and generational perspectives (Fetterman, 2010). Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, all names were anonymized, and audiovisual docu-

mentation was shared with each group as a form of reciprocal benefit. The researcher's position as a Jambi Malay and theatre practitioner facilitated access and trust while also requiring a reflective awareness of potential bias, which was addressed by cross-checking interpretations with participants and validating analytical claims with empirical data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Staging Structure of TAM

The staging structure of TAM is not merely an arrangement of dramatic scenes, but a cultural interface where custom, religion, and local creativity are negotiated. Through a comparison of *Mekar Kembali* and *Sereh Serumpun*, it is evident that each scene serves as a repertoire of renewal, demonstrating how this Malay theatre maintains continuity with tradition while simultaneously opening itself to social transformation.

Comparative analysis in Table 1 shows significant differences in the sequence of scenes performed. Although the overall dramaturgical framework appears similar, each group activates the performance structure differently in response to its historical conditions and social environment. *Sereh Serumpun*, the group that remains active, exhibits a more fluid and adaptive staging, while *Mekar Kembali*, which was revived after a two-decade hiatus, tends to rely more on collective memory and the authority of senior performers to reconstruct the sequence of scenes.

As explained by a senior practitioner, the absence of certain scenes is not an intentional omission but the result of oblivion following years without performances and documentation. This fact highlights that the staging in TAM is not simply inherited, but actively reconstructed, reflecting the inequality of access to continuity, regeneration, and institutional support.

Each scene carries an ideological role by reaffirming a hierarchical social order rooted in Malay court culture. The recurring presence of figures like the king, mi-

Table 1. The Staging Structure of TAM

Staging	Scene	Mekar Kembali	Sereh Serumpun
Opening Section	<i>Buka Lanseh</i> (Opening the Curtain)	P	O
	Beladun	P	P
	<i>Bekesah</i> (Narration)	P	P
	<i>Pengenalan pemain</i> (Player Introduction)	O	P
Core Section	<i>Bersenang hati</i> (Rejoicing)	O	P
	<i>Persembahan</i> ((Offering / Homage))	O	P
	<i>Berlayar</i> (Sailing)	P	P
Closing Section	<i>Bernyanyi bersama</i> (Singing Together)	P	P

nisters, and loyal subjects symbolically reproduces a model of authority that prioritizes harmony, obedience, and moral self-control. In Jambi, the traditional structure of authority has been significantly eroded. This staging can be read as a practice of cultural pedagogy that reasserts cultural ideals, rather than being merely a reflection of historical reality (Martadi et al., 2025).

Assalamualaikum kami ucapkan, kepada pe-nonton yang budiman. Kisah Abdul Muluk kami persembahkan, mana yang salah mo-hon dimaafkan.

(Lirik Buka Lanseh Mekar Kembali)

[Assalamualaikum, we say to the esteemed audience. The story of Abdul Muluk we present; for any faults, we ask for forgiveness.]

(Mekar Kembali Buka Lanseh Lyrics)

The *buka lanseh* scene, retained only by Mekar Kembali, demonstrates how the performance encodes moral and religious values. Adapted from the Jambi Malay wedding ritual, the sung prologue functions as a request for permission and forgiveness from the audience, establishing an ethical contract that frames the performance as a morally responsible communal act. The absence of *buka lanseh* in *Sereh Serumpun* should not be read as a loss of value, but rather as a process of reflective selection—an evaluation of which scenes are still considered socially relevant and performatively viable, alongside considerations of available resources and regeneration conditions.

The transition to *beladun* and *bekesah* shows how TAM exists between spectacle and authority. As seen in Figure 1, *Beladun* is a song accompanied by circular movement that invites the performers from backstage into the dramatic space, marking a transition from everyday reality to the world of the play. The lyrics of *beladun* explicitly mention Muaro Jambi, affirming regional identity and cultural ownership while also acting as an attraction for the audience (Aminuddin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, *bekesah* then functions as a musical narrative that introduces characters and the story's setting, replacing realistic scenography with oral storytelling and melodic cues. Narrative clarity is achieved not through stage visualization, but through performative memory and collective listening.

Banyak lahnyolah ladun
Lah bekamolah ladun
Ladun lahnyolah kami kasihlah kaulah dan sayang
Lah Jambi, Muarolahnyo Jambi
Ladun lahnyolah kami kasihlah kaulah dan sayang
Lah Jambi, Muarolahnyo Jambi
(Lirik Beladun Sereh Serumpun)

[Many are the *ladun* (calls/performers)
The *ladun* (gathering) has begun
Oh *ladun*, we give you love and affection
Ah Jambi, Muaro Jambi
Oh *ladun*, we give you love and affection
Ah Jambi, Muaro Jambi]
(Sereh Serumpun Beladun Lyrics)



Figure 1. *Beladun Scene Sereh Serumpun*

Furthermore, the scenes of *perkenalan tokoh* (character introduction), *bersenang hati* (joyful moment), and *persembahan* (offering/homage) form the dramatic core, displaying power relations within a fictional kingdom while normalizing the values of leadership, loyalty, and social harmony. Humor, improvisation, and fluid character naming open up space for interaction with the audience without damaging the story's hierarchical structure. The king's power is represented as wisdom and is socially embedded, produced through singing, symbolic gestures, and respectful language rooted in Malay custom and religious morality. Within this framework, power is not demonstrated through coercion but through consciousness rooted in custom and religious morality (Ali, 2022; Indrastuti et al., 2025).



Figure 2. *Berlayar Scene*

The sailing scene in Figure 2 marks a dramatic and symbolic shift from stability to uncertainty. With minimal props and synchronous movement, the performers create an imaginative sea landscape that signifies mobility, risk, and change. Humor, such as exaggerated navigation errors, temporarily destabilizes royal autho-

riety, allowing social critique to be present in a culturally safe form. This controlled reversal demonstrates TAM's capacity to accommodate social commentary without direct confrontation. Additionally, the sailing scene can be interpreted as a representation of the Malay community's closeness to the river, reflected in the symbol of the boat (Perttola & Kallio, 2024).

The performance concludes with a joint song-and-dance between the performers and the audience, dissolving the boundary between representation and participation. The concluding *pantun*, which contains an apology for imperfections, affirms humility, mutual respect, and collective ownership. Rather than closing with a mere narrative resolution, TAM restores social balance through shared embodiment. This moment removes the barrier between performers and audience, transforming the end of the performance into a warm and intimate collective celebration (Sun et al., 2022).

Overall, the staging structure of TAM reflects the tradition's ability to renew itself without losing its symbolic core (Cohen, 2019). Differences between the groups do not indicate a degradation of form, but rather an adaptive response to historical disruptions and contemporary social conditions. As a living repertoire (Tsolaki, 2024), TAM survives through negotiated bodies, voices, and memories, functioning as a cultural interface where literary heritage, oral practice, and local experience intertwine. Thus, the staging structure of TAM confirms that the continuity of tradition is not a complete heritage passed down from the past but is maintained through continuous curatorial decisions made by its inheritors amidst changing times.

Although TAM's staging structure is reproductive, a more complex problem exists. On one hand, this structure plays a role in preserving cultural memory. On the other hand, the structure limits social imagination by not allowing for diverse narratives. Certain scenes are retained because they are considered morally safe, familiar to the audience, and entertaining, while

others are eliminated or simplified due to considerations of duration, audience attention, or contemporary relevance.

The selective process of TAM's structure further confirms that performance structure is not neutral but is shaped by social pressures, the agency of artists, and audience reception (Filanovskaya, 2019; Kordsmeier, 2018; Purnomo, 2022). This finding also shows that the structure of Malay theatre operates as a form of reflective traditionalization, where religious values, Malay custom, and the demands of modern entertainment are negotiated into a dramatic unity (Beltz & Bern, 2023; Hardwick, 2020; Ishiguro, 2019). Like *Wayang Kulit*, *Mamanda*, *Dul Muluk*, and *Mak Yong*, TAM functions as a cultural interface that brings together literary texts, custom, religion, and collective experience, confirming its position as a living repertoire in the landscape of Malay folk theatre.

Characterization

Although the dramatic structure of TAM is rooted in the narrative of *Syair Abdul Muluk*, the characterization is marked by a significant degree of improvisation in terms of the number of characters, names, and performance attributes. This kind of improvisation reflects the fundamental nature of Malay theatre as a cultural practice that is adaptive and responsive to the constraints of space, temporal conditions, and audience expectations (Mark, 2023; Singh, 2016). Furthermore, TAM's improvisation serves as a performative arena where custom, religion, and colonial memory are negotiated simultaneously. Characterization functions as a social mechanism to stabilize authority, mediate morality, and channel critique safely.

In practice, the performers are not rigidly bound by the *syair's* literary structure. The characters of the king, queen, *mamando*, or guards are reinterpreted according to the local social context and audience taste. This reinterpretation reveals that characters in TAM operate within a symbolic power hierarchy, where certain figures, especially the king and royal elite,

maintain moral centrality, while comedic or additional characters become a space for experimentation and social commentary. Through this division, the performance maintains narrative stability while providing room for improvisation and renewal.

Structurally, both groups maintain a similar character hierarchy. Table 2 illustrates how the flexibility of naming and character disposition operates without disrupting the symbolic hierarchy. The king can appear firm and authoritative or gentle and humorous, while secondary characters consistently emphasize comedy and spontaneity. This variation is not an inconsistency, but a performative strategy that balances symbolic authority with the audience's affective engagement. Power in TAM is not enforced by coercion but by a performative consensus built on song, ethics, and ritual gestures. This representation aligns with the Jambi customary proverb (*seloko adat*), "*anak sekato bapak, istri sekato laki*" (the child follows the father's word, the wife follows the husband's word), which positions leadership as a moral obligation based on custom and family ethics (Manap et al., 2018).

Moral negotiation is evident in gender performance. In *Sereh Serumpun*, as shown in Figure 3, female roles are still performed by men, a practice rooted in religious and customary norms that limit female visibility (Karim, 1993; Sripaoraya, 2022). Based on interviews, this practice was initially not intended as humor but as an ethical strategy to maintain decorum and ensure the continuity of the performance within communal moral boundaries. Over time, audience reception shifted the practice's meaning, gradually transforming the moral boundary into a source of culturally accepted humor. Exaggerated femininity, bodily gestures, and vocal play elicit laughter, forming a culturally approved and highly anticipated convention of humor. Malay theatre has long been governed by a religious moral framework that emphasizes modesty and regulates the visibility of the female body. The absence of female performers on stage must

Table 2. Charaterization

Charaterization			
<i>Mekar Kembali</i>	<i>Sereh Serumpun</i>	Role	Dispositon
Abdul Misah, Abdul Muluk, Raja Syafrudin	Abdul Hamisah, Abdul Muluk, Raja Hindustan	King	Wise
Siti Rapeah, Siti Rahma Mamando	Siti Rapeah, Siti Rahma Mamando Barbari, Mamando Hindustan, Peramal	Queen	Humorous
Pahlawan, Menteri, Hulubalang, Wazir, Kelasi, Tuan Kobi	Harapan, Menteri, dan Hulubalang, Mentrus, Tan Kabi	Royal Advisor	Trustworthy and Humorous
Nelayan, Dayang-Dayang	Tuan Jalal, Toke Joget, Saudagar	Royal Courtier	Obedient and Humorous
		Commoner	Homorous

be understood not as a lack of agency but as a negotiated cultural compromise that allows for the continuity of the theatre without violating communal moral boundaries. By assigning female roles to male actors, TAM creates a symbolic buffer that allows the narrative to proceed while maintaining ethical legitimacy in the public space.

**Figure 3.** Men Playing the Role of Women

Although the practice of men playing women is often explained as a traditional legacy, a critical ethnographic perspective reveals it as an adaptive response to the regulation of gender visibility in public performance. In fact, *Mekar Kembali* began to make changes by involving women on stage, signaling a shift in values and the acceptance of female roles in performance art. The inclusion of female performers in *Mekar Kembali* signifies an ongoing recalibration of gender norms in a contemporary context.

Beyond gender embodiment, the symbolic negotiation of TAM characters

also takes place through the visual body, namely costumes and performative attributes, which equally function as a medium for articulating values, historical memory, and social critique. Senior practitioners affirm that the resemblance of costumes to colonial military uniforms is not merely aesthetic but a symbolic critique. Colonial visual representation is reframed within the Malay court narrative as a form of post-colonial power reversal. In this context, colonial symbols are not erased but domesticated and neutralized through humor, hyperbole, and narrative subordination. The bodies of the colonial-costumed soldiers carry a dual meaning. On one hand, they represent the obedience, discipline, and military order associated with colonial authority. On the other hand, as subordinates to the king within TAM's narrative structure, the same bodies function as a medium for symbolic critique of colonialism because that authority is subdued within the logic of the performance controlled by local values, hierarchy, and imagination.

A similar negotiation strategy is evident in humorous roles such as *toke joget* (dance master/pimp), who gain room for improvisation because their marginal status in the narrative hierarchy grants them greater freedom of expression. These characters operate on the periphery of authority, allowing them to voice everyday frustrations, social inequality, and economic hardship that would be deemed

inappropriate if expressed by royal elite figures. Through spontaneous dialogue, exaggerated gestures, and local idioms, the performers build closeness with the audience while inserting critique within the laughter.

Humor allows performers to comment indirectly on power relations, transforming critique into shared entertainment. This mode of expression reflects a cultural preference for indirectness in Malay communication, where critique is veiled to maintain social cohesion. Through satire and improvisation, comedic figures channel social critique toward leadership, gender relations, and daily life (Harpriyanti et al., 2023; Nugroho, 2023; Purwasito et al., 2024).

The organization of TAM characters becomes a social instrument that reflects cultural intelligence in balancing laughter, tradition, and critique, while still instilling moral educational values (Dhony et al., 2025). However, reliance on charismatic humorous performers also creates structural vulnerability. As with Kathakali and Wayang Orang Sriwedari (Hatley, 2005; Lichte, 2008; Waluyo, 2010; Zarrilli, 1984), audience attachment is often centered on the actor's body as a living archive (Schechner, 2006), which simultaneously maintains affective continuity and exposes the fragility of regeneration.

The improvisational nature of characterization reflects the dynamics of structured cultural agency. In-depth interviews and observations of rehearsal processes and performances show that the primary authority in character construction lies with the performers, especially senior actors and group leaders. Decisions regarding which characters are emphasized, modified, or marginalized reflect internal power relations while demonstrating how embodied knowledge operates beyond fidelity to the written text. Thus, TAM does not merely transmit canonical narratives but reproduces cultural meaning through performative practice controlled by the collective agency of its practitioners.

Overall, TAM's characterization

exhibits a complex interaction between gender, custom, religion, and colonial memory. Characters do not merely perform narrative functions but embody historical and moral negotiations that continue to shape Malay theatre. Through improvisation, humor, and visual symbols, TAM strives to survive as a vibrant folk performance due to its ability to process historical heritage into an expressive resource. TAM's characterization is inseparable from the social dynamics that gave birth to it, making this theatre an active space for the negotiation of authority, morality, and collective memory.

Minimalist Properties: The Table and Rattan

The use of props in TAM is highly minimalist. The table and a rattan stick do not function merely as visual complements but as performative devices that mediate the narrative structure and Malay social order. In this context, the table and rattan become instruments that regulate who is allowed to speak, when decisions are made, and how authority is enforced on stage.

The table marks the center of symbolic power. It functions as a marker for the palace space, where decisions are made, conflicts are negotiated, and social hierarchy is demonstrated. The presence of the table creates a clear spatial separation between the palace elite figures and other characters, thereby removing the need to explain the royal social structure verbally. The table prop has become a material metaphor for the hierarchical Malay social order, in which physical position in public space reflects moral and political standing.

Conversely, the rattan stick is functioned as a more dynamic and ambivalent prop. As shown in Figure 4, in the hands of the *peladun* and *pengkesah* (narrator-singers), the rattan functions to regulate the rhythm and tempo of the singing, scene changes, and dramatic transitions. Striking the rattan on the table creates temporal discipline, coordinates the performers' bodies, and maintains the collective focus

of the audience. At this stage, the rattan does not symbolize coercive power but a mechanism for social coordination that allows the performance to proceed in an orderly manner.



Figure 4. Use of table and rattan stick in *Beladun* scene

When the rattan moves to the hand of the king figure, its meaning shifts significantly. As shown in Figure 5, striking of the rattan is no longer merely rhythmic but performative, signaling the end of a debate, validating a decision, and asserting the finality of authority (Wulandari & Syafutri, 2024). The use of the rattan demonstrates how TAM produces power not through physical violence but through symbolic legitimacy. The king's authority is established within the framework of deliberation for consensus (*musyawarah mufakat*): dialogue is permitted, opinions can be expressed, but the final decision must be validated by the authoritative figure and must be implemented. Thus, the rattan becomes a medium that bridges participatory values with a hierarchical structure, a characteristic compromise in Malay political ethics.

The rattan as the main prop cannot be separated from the material culture context of the Jambi Malay society. In daily life, rattan is a familiar and versatile material, used in households, agriculture, and river activities. The transformation of rattan from a utilitarian object into a performative instrument shows how everyday life experiences are processed into aesthetic symbols. Within the critical ethnography framework, this practice can be read as a cultural strategy to instill legitimacy: authority on stage is presented

through a material that is socially known and accepted, rather than through foreign or monumental symbols.



Figure 5. Use of table and rattan stick by king

Regardless of the established function of the table and rattan, the process of documentation and field observation actually reveals a tension between tradition and the adaptation of the performance space, further sharpening the symbolic function of these props. Historically, TAM inherited the proscenium stage pattern from *Teater Bangsawan* (Abdullah, 2017), with a single-direction visual orientation and the use of curtains as a boundary for the palace space. Although TAM was initially performed in open, horseshoe-shaped spaces, the proscenium logic still dominated the arrangement of the actors' bodies and props. As seen in Figure 6. In an arena stage, this pattern creates a problem. The table and rattan as the symbolic center are not always optimally visible to the audience and the camera. This tension indicates that a change in physical space does not automatically alter the regime of meaning, as the performative logic has been internalized as the performers' habitus.



Figure 6. *Berlayar* Scene

The minimalism of props in TAM performances cannot be interpreted as an aesthetic limitation. The table and rattan are symbolic choices that encapsulate the materiality of place, the authority of leadership, and narrative coordination accepted without excessive materialization. More than just symbolic devices, these two props have become characteristic markers of TAM that differentiate it from other Malay theatres—even when the narratives, characters, and palace orientation are similar. The presence of the table and rattan forms a visual and performative identity that is immediately recognizable, so for the community, these two elements function as a cultural cue that signals, “this is TAM from Jambi.” With this strategy, TAM maintains its relevance as a flexible Malay theatre that is also deeply rooted in the experience of local creativity.

Musical Accompaniment: Violin, *Gendang Dua Muka*, and Gong

The musical accompaniment is presented with limited instrumentation, namely the violin, *gendang dua muka*, and gong. The function of the music is to regulate the dramatic flow, coordinate the performers’ bodies, and negotiate authority on stage. The music is always activated through a clear physical sign, which is the strike of the rattan stick. The sound does not stand alone as a musical expression but is in a hierarchical relation with gestures, props, and the power structure of the performance.

Based on observation and interviews, control over the music in the initial phase of the performance lies with the *pe-ladun*. A dialogue such as, “*bagaimana kalau kita beladun saja*” (how about we *beladun*), accompanied by a strike of the rattan stick on the table, functions as a performative command that activates the music and simultaneously mobilizes the entire collective body. Music operates as a practice of performativity, where authority is not declared through speech but is embodied through a repeated symbolic action.

Music is only played after the rattan

is struck, primarily as a marker for the end of a scene and the transition to the next narrative segment. Music is never found to be present without being preceded by the strike of the rattan. This finding indicates that music in TAM does not function as an autonomous emotional backdrop, but rather as a system of sound that is entirely subordinate to a mechanism of symbolic control.

The violin, although sonically dominant, does not hold structural authority. Its role is to mediate emotion and narrative continuity through melodies culturally recognized as the musical identity of Jambi Malay (Bahar et al., 2022; Gunawan, 2020). The violin melody builds the atmosphere, smooths emotional transitions, and links the actors’ improvisations. However, the presence of the violin is always within the temporal framework determined by the rattan, ensuring that musical expression remains within a strict dramatic discipline.

Gendang dua muka functions as a regulator of energy and body rhythm, synchronizing the actors’ movements, dialogue intensity, and the dynamics of the scenes. The beats of *gendang dua muka* enliven the atmosphere of *ladun*, *bekesah*, *persembahan*, and *bersenang hati*, and reinforce dramatic transitions, but once again, the drum does not operate independently. The drum’s rhythm follows the structure marked by the rattan, making it part of a broader system of social coordination, not merely a sound-producing instrument.

The role of the gong is more limited but laden with symbolic meaning. Based on interviews, in past practices, the gong or a smaller instrument like the *tetawak*, was always struck before the performance began. This sound would spread throughout the village and was believed to be a collective call to gather. In a village with minimal modern technological intervention, the gong served as a medium of social communication. However, in the Cultural Park’s contemporary documentation, this practice is no longer carried out because the audience is already present. This change indicates that the ritual function of the

gong is contextual and adaptive, depending on the social conditions of the performance space.

Interestingly, the performers do not refer to the music as a “binder” or “mood keeper.” Instead, they consistently emphasize that the strike of the rattan is what marks and controls everything. This statement is important because it shifts the analysis from the aesthetics of sound to performative power relations. Music only becomes effective in so far as it is connected to a collectively recognized authoritative gesture (Matusky, 2021). Within this framework, the rattan functions as a semiotic control center that coordinates sound, body, and narrative.

There is no difference in instrumentation between *Mekar Kembali* and *Sereh Serumpun*. However, differences emerge in the tone, lyrics, and playing style, signaling musical creativity even though the narratives performed are similar. This uniformity of instruments but diversity of expression confirms that TAM’s identity lies not in material variations, but in a performative practice that is living and contextual.

Another critical dimension appears in the position of the musicians within the structure of performance sustainability. Musical instruments are not stored collectively like costumes but are attached to individual musicians. This dependence creates structural vulnerability. The case of *Mekar Kembali* shows that the absence of one violin player nearly jeopardized the performance because the violin had been sold due to economic pressure. The musicians function as a living archive of tradition. Without adequate documentation, musical knowledge is entirely embodied in the individual’s body. Conversely, the presence of a young violinist in the *Sereh Serumpun* group demonstrates how musical regeneration can sustain the tradition’s continuity.

Music in TAM is not just a matter of aesthetics. Musical instruments involve cultural economics, the distribution of knowledge, and the sustainability of performative practice. Sound is produced and

controlled through strict symbolic relations. Music does not stand as an autonomous element but as part of a performative system regulated by the rattan, negotiated through the bodies of the performers, and passed down through living practice. In this context, the decrease in musicians, especially the violin as a key instrument, potentially threatens the continuity of musical transmission and, ultimately, the future sustainability of TAM.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that *Teater Abdul Muluk* (TAM) in Jambi cannot be understood as a peripheral variant of Malay theatre, but rather as a reflective cultural practice that actively reprocesses its inherited form through local history, religious sensibility, and community-based creativity. By positioning TAM as the locus of analysis, this study recalibrates the analytical framework of Malay theatre, showing that practices in regions often marginalized are fields of meaning and cultural authority production, not merely derivatives of canonical centers.

Empirical findings show that TAM’s sustainability is not dependent on the textual reproduction of *Syair Abdul Muluk*, but on performative negotiation that takes place at the level of staging structure, characterization, props, and music. The performance structure functions as a cultural interface where Malay custom, Islamic ethics, and entertainment demands are negotiated simultaneously, while characterization articulates power relations and morality through humor, gender performance, and the symbolic domestication of colonial memory.

The most salient analytical contribution lies in the use of the table and rattan props, which function as the symbolic control center of the performance. These two elements serve as performative markers that coordinate the body, sound, and narrative, and mediate the relationship between participatory deliberation and the

finality of authority. Music is subordinate to the gesture of power marked by the rattan, affirming that sound does not operate autonomously. The use of the table and rattan forms a distinctive performative character for Malay theatre in Jambi. The table and rattan provide a strong foundation for TAM's development, rather than the accumulation of visual or technological spectacle.

The existence of TAM affirms that Malay theatre also lives and thrives in Jambi, with distinct performative characteristics that are conceptually equivalent. More broadly, this finding opens up space for comparative studies between Malay theatre traditions and contributes to Southeast Asian theatre studies by positioning local practices as producers of performative theory, not merely objects of ethnographic description.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research and publication were funded by the Indonesian Education Scholarship, Center for Higher Education Funding and Assessment, and Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education, under decree number 00573/BPPT/BPI.06/9/2023. The researchers would also like to express their sincere gratitude to the artists of *Komunitas Teater Abdul Muluk Mekar Kembali* and *Sanggar Seni Sereh Serumpun* for providing the space and supporting this research. In addition, gratitude is expressed to all related parties who contributed for the smooth conduct of this study. Hopefully, this research will contribute to the advancement of culture in Indonesia.

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