

# The Performance of Islamic Nasep Music in Bangkok

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## Abstract

This research focuses on the Nasep performance of the Zainub band in Bangkok, regards its background, band administration and knowledge transmission including Islamic views on music performance. Results have shown that Nasep, which originated from Nasheed and Li-ke Riab is the performing art of Muslims in central Thailand. The Zainub band, where most members are women is a gathering of award winning Qaris<sup>1</sup> and its main presentation is Arab-Malay songs. Musical knowledge has been transmitted by rote and is self-taught. The band members uphold the view that singing and playing music are allowed as long as they do not violate Islamic morals. The main instruments are three types of drums; Doumbek, Cajon and Bongos along with a violin and accordion. The performances of the Zainub band embody the characteristics of cultural integration. Modern media technologies are adopted to meet the audiences' preferences while still maintaining their cultural identity, traditions and beliefs.

**Keywords:** *Nasep Music, Zainub Band, Islamic Music, Muslim Music, Bangkok, Music*

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## Introduction

Nasep is one of the Islamic folk performing arts that can be found in Thailand, especially, in Bangkok and nearby provinces. The majority of the Muslims who own the Nasep performances are descendants of Pattani Muslims. Pattani was a kingdom in Southern Thailand that used to be a very prosperous port during the 16th-18th centuries. Arab and Indian traders who came to Pattani spread Islam to the region. Subsequently, Pattani adopted the religion and became an important site of Islamic and Malay culture (Madakakul, cited in Jitmoud and Moosa, 1998:24). In the early Rattanakosin period, Pattani was completely under the governing of Thailand and was divided into provinces. During the reigns of King Rama I (1782 - 1809) and King Rama III (1824 - 1851) there were several rebellions in these provinces. After each rebellion's suppression, Malay Muslims have been taken captive and were brought up to be the workforce settled in the suburbs of Bangkok such as at Thung Khru, Khlong Tan, Min Buri, Nong Chok, and in nearby provinces, such as Chachoengsao, Nakhon Nayok, Pathum Thani (Jitmoud and Moosa, 1998:25 and Kulsirisawat, cited in, *ibid*:37). These Pattani Muslims still maintain their beliefs, languages, customs, traditions, arts, and cultures, including the performing arts of Nasep. **๙๖ ๙**. In Bangkok, two types of Muslim folk performing arts, namely Li-ke Riab and traditional Nasep, are found coinciding with the immigration of Muslims from southern Thailand (Yodwised, 2010:53).

In terms of the meaning of Nasep, Numvol, Pansuea, and Tangdachahiran, (2013:71) explain that Nasep is the folk music of the Muslims with lyrics about Islamic teachings. "Nasep" comes from the word "Nasheed" or "Na-se" which is a Malay word that came to Bangkok with Pattani Muslims. As time passes, the word Na-se is distorted to Nasep. Likewise, Yodwised says that Muslims in Pattani Province, the ancestors of Muslims in Bangkok and nearby provinces, pronounced the word Nasheed as Na-se which eventually becomes "Nasep," a term used and understood only among the Muslims of central Thailand (Yodwised, 2010:225).

Matusky and Tan (2004:264 cited in Barendregt, 2011:236) say that in Malaysia, Nasheed has been a common song since the 1950s as an Interlude song in both state and national Qari competitions. The modern Nasheed songs have been commercially prosperous in Malaysia and Indonesia since the late 1980s, attributed to the popularity and dissemination of Iranian martial music and as Malay students studying in Arab countries such as Yemen, Jordan and Kuwait brought cassette tapes of this kind of music back to their homeland. Barendregt (2006:10) also states that pop Nasheed's flourishing is the result of the development of the Indonesian and Malaysian middle class into a modern lifestyle of Islamic chic, full of modern media and consumption.

Nasep has its roots in Li-ke Riab, which is one of the Muslim cultural performances which originated from Li-ke Maulid or the Malay's chanting to praise Nabi. Sutchaya describes the Li-ke Riab as a performance accompanied by a Rebana drum adapted from a prayer praising the Lord. Called Li-ke Riab since its performers sit flat (riab in Thai) on the floor, it has become a unique performance of the Malays in Bangkok and the central region. (Sutchaya, 2011:19).

The lyrics of Li-ke Riab come from the hymns in the book of Barzanji with Nasep as the fifth stage of the performance called Og Nasep, accompanied by instruments such as tambourines, maracas, cymbals, accordions, etc. The lyrics used include both Arabic and Thai, but the content is related to religious provisions (Yodwised, 2010:198).

Accordingly, Nasep performances are sometimes performed with Li-ke Riab as seen in the performances of the Mitcharoen Nasep band of Buengnumrak Subdistrict, Bangnampriaw District, Chachoengsao Province, where there are both Nasep performed following the Li-ke Riab which is accompanied with only the Rebana drum and Nasep performed separately which uses a variety of instruments, including maracas, tambourines, tom drum, bongo drum, and accordion (Chantanapumma, C., 2011:56).

At present, many Nasep bands are performing in both traditional and modern styles. The lyrics are available in Arabic, Malay, and Thai. The typical characteristic of traditional Nasep songs is choral singing with or without accompanying instruments. The instruments that accompany the Nasep are only simple ones such as drums and cymbal drums or tambourines. Singers only sway or blow their hands, no dancing (Yodwised, 2010:226) The lyric used in the Nasep includes original lyrics in Arabic and Malay, as well as the newly composed ones in Thai. The Hussaini, a traditional Nasep band of Samphao Lom Subdistrict, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya District, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, uses old Arabic songs and a few newly composed songs in both Thai and Arabic (Petchkongthong, 2018: 139-140). Differently, the Al Amin Nasep band of the Wong Wian Yai railway station community uses the Malay lyrics (Numvol, Punsuea, and Tangdachahiran, 2016: 70-71). Some of the newly composed songs are intended to match the purpose of the performance, for example; the Mitcharoen Nasep band composed a new song “Kho Tang Ngan” (proposal for marriage) in Thai lyrics to play in Nika or a wedding ceremony (Chandanabhuma, 2011:95-96).

The study of Nasep music of the Zainub band is to learn the characteristics and styles of music in the folk performing arts of Thai Muslims, to understand the Thai-Muslim beliefs, their ways of life, and their society. The study also shows the cultural adaptability of folk art to survive in the globalization trend since the band can adapt its performances in many styles.

### **The Background of the Zainub Band**

The Zainub Band was formed around 2009.<sup>2</sup> The band members are all familiar friends in the Arab-Malay music scene, especially in the Baby Arabia band<sup>3</sup> which was a very famous Nasep band of the time. The Zainub Nasep band is one of the master-level bands in the genre. Besides, the band is an example of the equal status of Muslim men and women since its leader and most of the singers are female, and only its musicians are male. The singers and musicians of the Zainub band are all residents of Bangkok and most of them are descended from Malay Muslims. Winning the Qari competitions or Anasheed reading contests, the band members usually begin their careers invited by music companies to be their sing-

ers and release music albums, while some set up their bands themselves. The Zainub band is led by Maya Aminsen or Zainub Boonmee, a Qari competition winner herself, who was persuaded to join the Baby Arabia band, but later, set up her Zainub band. The band consists of 14 members, with Kru Surasak Luanwong as music arranger, and Kru Sorbah or Kemipha Wongmasoh, another winner of the Qari competition, as a music instructor.

### **Musical Transmission**

Most of the singers and musicians in the Zainub Band did not attend formal music classes but were often self-taught by following experts' techniques or learning from their elders. One of the few who have studied music formally from a music school is Kru Surasak Luanwong, the band's music arranger, who can arrange songs from other languages into a style suitable for the era and tastes of Thai people. Concerning the transmitting of musical knowledge, Zainub band senior artists are likely to pass on their musical knowledge to their juniors orally in person. In addition, Kru Surasak Luanwong also gave advice and helped develop skills for youths. Members of the band who have formally passed on their knowledge include Mana Wangpanya, who teaches music at home, at Islamic religious schools, and Youth Centers; and Lakhana Lae-arun who teaches Li-ke Hulu to children. In addition, the Zainub band members also support the fellow Nasep bands, which currently comprises approximately 13 bands, by being their role models, encouraging, giving advice, forwarding jobs, and organizing additional singers and musicians if any band needs it. All those are done to help preserve the traditional Nasep music. However, for the new generation, the traditional Nasep is difficult to remember and requires a lot of patience to practice, hence, it is easy for them to turn to modern music. To survive in the music business, folk arts such as the traditional Nasep bands have to adopt modern instruments to meet the preferences of the audience whose cultural values are altered by globalization and new technologies.

### **Zainub Band's Performances**

Members of the Zainub band work together as brothers and sisters with the bandleader taking care of and respecting all members. The Zainub band can be hired to perform in various auspicious events such as weddings, baby birth hair shavings, circumcisions, and Hari Raya festival, including events and fairs of religious organizations such as schools and mosques, except the funeral. It is worth noting here that among the ethnic groups' musical performances in Bangkok, the Sikh Kirtan, and the Hindu band can perform at the funeral (Komkam, 2021:141 and Pornprasit, 2021:219). The Zainub band's variety of shows can be adjusted according to the needs and budget of the hirers. The shows include traditional Nasep performances, Qari recitations, and Anasheed recitations. Thai country songs (Loog Thoong) and Arab-Malay Songs can also be performed in a string combo style or an orchestral style consisting of a fully electric instrument with or without dancers. The Zainub band travels to perform all over Thailand and in neighboring countries such as Malaysia. Besides the live performances, the band used to have its performances recorded on cassette tapes, videotapes, and CDs for sale. However, currently, the Zainub band's performances are publicized on internet

media such as Facebook and YouTube. (Aminsen, interview, February 25, 2019). The Zainub band plays two styles of Arab-Malay songs, traditional and modern, the latter is a string combo. The master copies, selected from famous songs popular among Thai people, are brought from many countries, mainly Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and from Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. The lyrics concern religious teachings, praising the Prophet, and inducing people to do good deeds. However, lately, there are songs about love and the beauty of women as well. For Zainub band's further adaptation to local people, Kru Leng Sangarun and Kru Wicha Jimek who have good performances in both Arabic and Thai language, convert Arabic lyrics to Thai, and Kru Surasak Luanwong recomposes the music to be more modern and in more suitable styles for Thai people. Thai songs are taken from psalms in praise of the Prophet called Barzanji. The band's style is to apply the reading of the Quran to melodies and sing with a tremolo (Aminsen, and Wongmasoh, interview, February 25, 2019).

### **Islamic Views Of Band Members Toward Music Performances**

There are different views on music in Islam. Some view that all music is strictly prohibited, and some view that music is permitted as long as the song lyrics do not violate morals and religious ordinances and the instrument used is a single-faced drum. Daoh (2010:14-15) said that Islamic rules allow the singing of songs whose contents reside in Islamic morality, encourage faith in Allah, and promote good deeds. Women's singing can only be performed among the female audience and the only permissible musical instrument is the duff drum.

Numvol, Phansue, and Tangdajahiran, (2013:71) said that according to Islamic rules, the prohibition on playing and singing can be flexible in some cases such as on the occasion of welcoming important persons, wedding celebrations, proper funfairs, pure sports, and lullabies, where songs are spirited uplifting, encourage people to do religious activities and not related to love between women and men. Apart from Al-Qaradawi (296-300) who said that singing must conform to Muslim ethics and religious mandate, Phaosavadi (2020:119-121), also states the contexts and principles of musical practices of the annual Anasheed competition in Bangkok that young women were allowed to participate in the competition but the singing must not be impolite, obscene, and sexually charged songs.

However, Mahasiratanaroj (2016:2) said that Islamic scholars are still debating whether Muslims could sing, play and listen to music. They are divided into several groups and interpret the religious laws differently. The first group sees that singing and playing music was permissible in all cases since no religious ordinance (Hadith) directly stated the ban against playing music and singing. The second group interprets the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad as being able to play music and sing in some cases, such as at weddings, parties, and welcoming travelers. The third group considers music to be forbidden under any circumstances and is considered a great sin. Therefore, it is still an argument that depends on the views of each religious scholar. Accordingly, one still has a right to choose to believe in any aforementioned viewpoints. From the researchers' interviews, it was found that the Zainub band members choose to adhere to the view that singing

and playing music can be done as long as the content of the song is praising God and the Prophet and encouraging people to do good deeds. In their opinion, Nasep is a Muslim performing culture that should be preserved and continued further and it can be a tool to promote Islam to the new generation which conforms to Binson et al. (2011:43) who says that culture plays a crucial role in how individuals identify with their community and reflects one's way of life in the society. Culture carries the core characteristics of one's social group. In addition, the band members also agree that singing Nasep is a joy for both the performers and the audience (Wangpanya, Jimek, and Aminsens, interview, February 25, 2019).

The status of Muslim women is another interesting issue. The Zainub band's group leader and most of the singers are women where, according to Muslim laws, the performance of women in public is prohibited. Women have many prohibitions or restrictions on dress and conduct, which Phakdeesettakul (2015:4) explains that those restrictions on Islamic women do not intend to preclude, confine or oppress women in any way, but they mean to honor and maintain the dignity of women, to prevent them from being easily harassed by men either by sight or by action. Today, as the global society is all connected, and influences of different religions and civilizations spread everywhere, people are more open-minded and more tolerant of changes and differences. Muslim women received higher education and do a variety of work. The Zainub band has a leader, instructors, and singers who are women. Their talents are accepted by all members of the band including men. Kru Zainub and Kru Sorbah are recognized as the core persons who lead the band to prosperity from the past until the present.

### The Musical Contents

The Zainub Band performs both applied Thai Nasep and traditional Nasep. There are 14 songs demonstrated for this research study according to the song list and their meanings are as follows:

1. Ibda Binafsik, the lyrics of the song are about the praise of God.
2. Bunga Tanjung is a Malay song that is similar to the Indonesian song Ole-ole Bandung. The lyrics are a comparison of the beauty of women and flowers (Wongmaso, interview, February 25, 2019).
3. Sollu Alan Nabi is a song praising the Prophet Muhammad (Wangpanya., interview, February 25, 2019)
4. Soda Soda is a joyful song to give liveliness to the atmosphere. Aminsens said that this song is often used as an interlude to create a merry atmosphere (Aminsens, interview, February 25, 2019).
5. Amantu Billahi is a song about doing good deeds for God.
6. Fayatalamis is a song about the praising of the Prophet.
7. Lily is a Lebanese song about a woman lamenting for her lover (Wongmasoh, interview, February 25, 2019).
8. Irham Yallor is an important song about the Holy Quran (Wongmasoh, interview, February 25, 2019)
9. Malayis is a joyful song from Arab countries (Wangpanya, interview, February 25, 2019).
10. Yabana is another joyful song of the Arab country (Wangpanya, interview, February 25, 2019).

11. Assubhu Bada is a hymn in praise of the Prophet which is a familiar hymn to Muslims in Thailand (Aminsen, interview, February 25, 2019).
12. Alasan is a song about doing good and thanking God.
13. Yaayum is a song about doing good and those who do good deeds will go to heaven (Wongmasoh, interview, February 25, 2019)
14. Sayonara (Goodbye Song) is a farewell song with its title in Japanese meaning goodbye, is usually played as the last song of the performance (Wongmasho, interview, February 25, 2019).



Figure 1. Lead singers and the choir of the Zainub Boonmee band. Source: The research team, recorded on Feb. 25, 2019.



Figure 2. Musicians of the Zainub Boonmee band. Source: The research team, recorded on Feb. 25, 2019.

#### Musical instruments of the Zainub Band

The most important instruments of the Zainub band are 3 types of drums, namely the Dumbek or Arabian drum – Figure 2, 3rd from the right; the Cajon drum, 4th from the right and the Bongo drums, 2nd from the right.



The drums are characterized as follows:

#### ***Doumbek or Darbuka or Arabic Drums***

Ragheb (2012:5-19) describes the darbuka drum as a single-faced leather drum in a goblet shape, commonly used in Turkish folk music. There are different types of darbuka drums depending on the material used and the method of manufacture. The original darbuka drum was made of ceramic, and later versions were made of metal, available either by spinning or casting. Ceramic darbuka drums have been used in Turkey for centuries, but known colloquially by other names, for example, in Western Turkey it is called *dumbelek* or *dumbek*, in Eastern Turkey, it is called *deblek* or *deplek*. According to Karaol and Dogrusoz (2014: 54), the darbuka is a goblet drum in the same family as the northern African drums such as *dunun* and *djembe* and spreads from North Africa to the Middle East. Most of the darbuka drums of this region are made of clay or ceramics. However, other territories may also use darbuka drums made of wood or metal.

Kru Sayan Prasertkan, a musician in the Zainub band, explains that the Doumbek drum or Arabic drum is commonly used in Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Arab countries. To play the drum, a drummer sits on a chair with his legs down and puts the drum on his lap to make the sound crisp and clear. To complete the melodies, at least 3 Arabic drums are required, small, medium, and large drums. The large drum's face is stretched with suede, acting as tempo and timing control, and together with the medium drum are played giving main tempos. The small drum gives a high-pitched sound to harmonize the tones. The faces of the drum can vary from 4 inches to 20 inches. The methods of playing the drum are not fixed, but flexible according to the rhythm of the lyrics and style of the singer (Prasertkan, interview, February 25, 2019).

#### ***Cajon Drum***

Ludwigsen (2015:2-3) explains that the Cajon or box drum originated in Peru during the 16th century. Cajon is a box or a crate used as a good container for transporting on ships. The African slaves who worked around the ports converted these boxes into musical instruments as no other instruments were allowed. When slavery in Peru ended in AD 1856 Cajon became a local cultural heritage instrument and has become more popular and more widespread since it is simple and easy to hold and move. The Cajon is usually made of plywood, about 50cm high, 30cm wide, and deep, with a round hole drilled in the back. Some may have a snare or a metal dowel set that acts as a vibrating mechanism mounted on the Cajon's face. Ondrejka, et al (2017:152) describes the Cajon as a percussion instrument used to accompany many types of music such as samba, rumba, country, folk, pop, etc. The Cajon is the most used instrument in Afro-Peruvian music since the 18th century. Most are made of plywood or hardwood. It may now be made with other synthetic materials such as carbon, laminates, or plexiglass. Phiman Chamchuri, a Zainub band musician, refer to the Cajon drumming that different model of Cajon has different drumming positions. Some may be divided into left and right sides. The left side of the drum produces a bass sound while the right side gives a snare sound. Some models are divided into the upper half and the lower half. The Cajon drum is used as a substitute for a drum kit in smaller events such as small weddings (Chamchuri, interview, February 25, 2019)



### **Bongo Drum**

The Bongo drum is a kind of Afro-Cuban drum. In other words, it originated in Cuba but was born in the culture of Africans who were enslaved and forced to work there. Salloum (1997:5-6) describes the Bongo drum as two attached small single-faced drums, made of wood or fiberglass. The smaller drum is called macho (meaning man), with its face about 7" wide, the bigger drum is called hembra (meaning woman), with its face about 8-9" wide. Bongo drums are compact, lightweight, easy to transport, durable, and do not require much maintenance. In the beginning, the Bongo drum is used in Cuban music called Son which originated in the 1900s in eastern Cuba.

Kru Wichai Chimek explained that the Bongo drums are used to play replacing the small Arabic drums. The function of this drum is to provide a more firm and joyful rhythm while the rhythmic control function is on the Cajon and Arab drums. The drumming method is to sit and put the drum on the lap with its tail turned backward and strike the drums with fingertips. The small Bongo drum is used more often than the big one. The bongo drums produce two types of sound, a bang sound when struck on the edge and a thud sound when struck in the center. As for the tempo, two types of tempos, Cha-cha-cha and Disco, are used (Jimek, interview, February 25, 2019).

Of all these three types of drums, the Doumbek gives a bass sound, the Cajon provides beats similar to the drum kit and the Bongo gives a high-pitched, dominant, and gimmicky sound. Two tempos are used to play Arabic-Malay music in Thailand, disco, and Cha-cha-cha. The musicians regard drums as musical instruments that entertain and create happiness and can help attract people to listen to their religious songs (Prasertkorn, interview, February 25, 2019). In addition to these drums, which are the main instruments of the band, other musical instruments used in the Zainub Nasep band are the violin and accordion (Figure 2: 2nd and 3rd from the left). Below is an example of the melody style of the Zainub Band (see Figure 3.)

### **Discussion**

One of the most noticeable things in the study of the Zainub band is the ability to adapt culturally or in other words, Cultural Dynamics, which Binson (2011:382) describes as a cultural change in society that is affected by the influx of Western cultures that infiltrate the way of life of Thai people throughout the region. Accordingly, the adaptation of the indigenous cultures takes place so that the cultures can survive the changes. In these adaptations for survival, there occurs acculturation resulting from interactions between people of different cultures (Binson, *ibid*:383). The acculturation can be seen when the Zainub band, a Muslim band, can perform Thai country music; the original Arabic songs are adapted to suit the tastes of Thai people and some have their lyrics translated into Thai; and drums from various cultures, the Cajon from Peru and the Bongo from Cuba are used to enhance their performances. The Zainub band went from single-faced drums to western and electric instruments, from Nasep to a string combo and Thai country style, with or without dancers. It is the development of culture by combining one's

group culture with other cultures of interest and at the same time harmonizing with the mainstream culture. In a way, the Zainub band’s adaptations are according to globalization, the process which Short, Boniche, et al. (2001:1-2) describe as the expansion of economic, cultural, and political activities that spread similarities across the world. The power that plays a key role in this process is technological advancement and the global entertainment industry.

### Irham Yallor Song

Instrumental Melody



Singing Melody Part 1



Singing Melody Part 2



Figure 3. Irham Yallor Song.

Garofalo (1993:22-23) describes the shift in global music culture that in the early 1980s, the advancement in satellite communications allowed live performances of world-renowned artists to be instantly broadcasted to the world. The popularity of European and American artists flowing in with such communication technologies has influenced the musical interest of Muslims and stimulated the development of music performances. The Zainub band took advantage of technological

advancements to help promote and disseminate its Nasep music widely. To present its performances, the band has gone from recorded cassette tapes, videos, and CDs of the past, to various social media like Facebook and YouTube at present. The ability to adapt to the trends of the era has made the Zainub band remain firmly in the Muslim music industry. Crozet (2017:4) said that in globalization, not only transnational culture will replace the old culture, but cultures are also integrated and at the same time, globalization is influenced by local culture itself. Globalization can, therefore, help support and restore the local culture at the same time, as modern music is used to promote traditional performance culture such as Nasep so that it can remain in the audience's popularity for a long time. The Nasep performance of the Zainub band shows the nature and form of music in the Thai Muslim folk performing arts that create the understanding of the way of life, beliefs, social conditions, local culture mixed with traditional culture, and the adaptation to the rapidly expanding western culture in the era of globalization.

### Conclusion

Originated from the confluence of winning Qaris, the Zainub Nasep band presents Arab-Malay music and is a popular band among Muslims in Bangkok and the central region of Thailand. The band leader and nearly all singers are women. Most of the band members have learned music themselves by watching and following experts' techniques or some may learn from their ancestors by rote. The knowledge transferring within the band is performed orally from seniors to juniors, and on some occasions, band members also teach interested youngsters. The Zainub band has been in popularity for a long time owing to the management that allows the band's performances to be adapted to various styles to meet the preferences of the audience. As for Islamic rules on music, the Zainub band members adhere to the view that playing music and singing can be done as long as they do not violate Islamic morals. For the musical contents, the instruments are a mixture of Arabic and Western drums with the violin and accordion while the lyrics focus on the Muslim belief. These Zainub band members still hope to inherit the performance culture and pass on this rare Muslim performance to future generations amid the changing trend of the present world.

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### Endnotes

- 1 A Qari means a person who recites the Quran with the proper rules of recitation
- 2 From an interview with Aminsen, M. on February 25, 2019 who said that the Zainub band has separated from Baby Arabia about 10 years ago.
- 3 The Baby Arabia band formed in 1975 by a young group in On Nut, led by Ke, Kue and Imron. They focus on percussion and sing mainly Arabic and Malay songs. The band has competed in the NASES music competition across the country and has won many awards (Pakarapho, P., 2010).

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