

## The Existence of Bangsawan Theatre in Palembang Viewed From the Demographic Aspect



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**ABSTRACT:** Teater Bangsawan has a long history and is an important part of Palembang's cultural heritage. Its existence reflects the continuity of culture and traditions passed down from generation to generation and becomes a symbol of the cultural identity of the local community. This performance includes various traditional elements such as music, dance, traditional clothing, and Palembang language. The existence of Bangsawan theater also plays an important role in education and learning. This performance is not only entertainment, but also a learning medium that teaches moral values, history, and art skills to the performers and audience. Bangsawan theater became a place to study culture and develop creativity in the realm of performing arts. Palembang as a multicultural city has a strong ethnic influence in the theater of nobility. The performance combines elements of Malay, Chinese, Arab, and Indian cultures, creating a wealth of diverse arts and representing the diversity of Palembang society. The Bangsawan theater is an important forum for the people of Palembang to convey and strengthen Palembang's cultural identity. This performance reflects the values, stories, and traditions cherished by the people of Palembang, thus becoming a means to maintain and bring cultural heritage to life. The demographic development of the population has influenced the existence of the aristocratic theater. Changes in age composition, increased urbanization, and shifts in cultural values have an impact on people's interest and participation in traditional performing arts. With the onset of significant demographic changes, aristocratic theater experienced a decline in popularity due to the younger generation being more interested in modern forms of entertainment.

**KEYWORDS:** Theater Bangsawan, multicultural, demography, decline

### INTRODUCTION

Bangsawan Theatre is a unique art that develops in Palembang society, the uniqueness of this theater is due to the combination of traditional and modern theater elements in its performance. This is in line with its emergence at the end of the era of traditional theatre and the beginning of modern Malay theatre (Abdullah. NAV., 2017). Abdullah further explained that among the elements of traditional theatre in the nobility are the ritual opening and closing of the stage, and there is no script, direction and rehearsal of special *plays* before the performance, as in modern theatre. Forms of theatrical performance Bangsawans in Palembang, broadly divided into three parts which include pre-performance, performance, and closing. The implementation of the first part (pre-performance) is carried out offerings, prayer readings, eating together, and *mbrek lakonan* (pouring). After this first part is over, the Bangsawan Theater performance is carried out according to the storyline delivered by the director. Performances generally last about seven to eight hours. Usually performances in Palembang start at around 21.00 and end at around 03.00 or 04.00 in the morning. Although the performance of Teater Bangsawan in Palembang has similarities in general related to the parts of the performance, each group shows differences from some or as a whole the elements presented. The difference in question is closely related to the cultural space, this is because of the differences in the characteristics of the cultural space of each group.



**Figure 1. Bangsawan Theatre performance in Palembang involving the author in the context of extracting research data (Photo: Indah Zulhidayati, 2019)**

Hanny Oktaviani explained that aristocratic theater originated in India around the 1870s in Malaysia which then developed to spread in almost all Malay regions, one of which was in Palembang (Hanny Oktaviani, 2018: 45). Bangsawan Theatre is not an art that emerged directly from the lives of Palembang people, but art that emerged as a result of the existence of a center of interaction and trade in Palembang. Palembang with the Musinya river became one of the destinations for traders from various countries in the past (Supriyanto, 2013: 51-55) Palembang became a place of interaction between traders both from India, the Middle East, as well as from Persia and Europe (Muhammad Ikhsan, Rd., 2018: 100-101). This situation then opened up opportunities for traders to make cultural exchanges. The art that is said to have originated from India is said to have been brought to almost all Malay plains, one of which was to Palembang (Oktaviani, 2018: 2). The Bangsawan Theatre that developed in Palembang has unique characteristics and characters. This form of theater has a structure in the form of pre-performance, performance and closing. Pre-performance in the presentation or performance of Bangsawan theater is the initial part that is always presented by all Bangsawan theater groups in Palembang in performance. This part was not shown live on stage, but it became a whole series of performances that were carried out. Bangsawan theater performances will not be presented or performed without going through the process. That part in the aristocratic theater performance although not shown directly on stage, but its existence has a crucial role in a series of performances. At the beginning or pre-show, the determinants of the presentation are raised and conveyed to all players involved in the show. In addition, pre-performance has its own meaning for performers, especially in the presentation of Bangsawan theater. In this section, there are at least three things that every Bangsawan theater group that wants to present a performance does. These three things include offerings, prayers, and direction. Offerings and prayers are rites performed by Bangsawan theater groups with specific purposes related to the performance of performances. While directing is a session where the director gives direction to the entire actor or cast related to what things will be presented in front of the audience as well as the play, plot, and readiness. Offerings are usually done an hour before the performance takes place. The ingredients are gathered together, then the frankincense is burned, after which the elders pray for the offering. Prayers have been recited by the elders and then one by one the offerings are placed on the incense that has been smoked and rotated as much as.

Three times. After that the elders spread or tossed the smoke of offerings to the front or back area of the performance stage, to the area where the music performers and also where the actors made up, followed by the elders sprinkling turmeric rice into the same area, then the players were gathered around the offerings and prayed Together with asking for blessings, the cast and music players usually fight to eat the grilled chicken offering.

Entering the performance section, it begins with *bekiso*, which is a verse that is sung in the form of introducing the players, as well as a brief plot that will be played. Only then is the act by act played according to the play performed. Every change of act must have a song, be it a dangdut song or a Malay song sung by the cast. Usually in the first round, the first comedian character to appear is the two khadam, and sometimes the director will also see the situation and conditions related to the emergence of khadam, for example in that round the audience has begun to decrease in enthusiasm, then khadam will be presented again in that round. In the closing part, there is a narrative of gratitude in the form of *bekiso*, which is a verse guide sung containing gratitude.

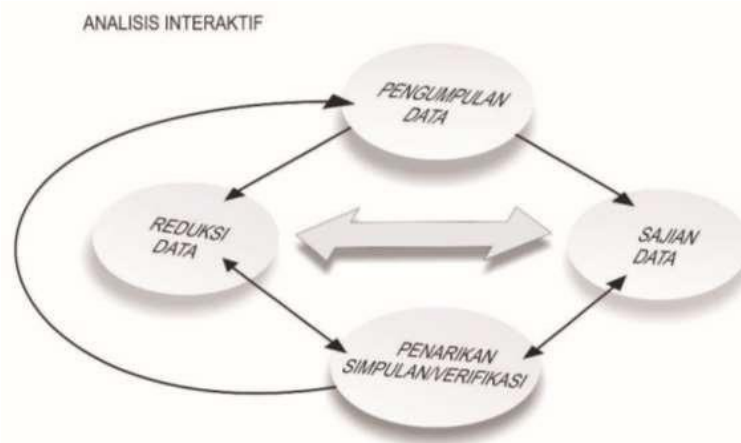
Over time, this art spread due to demographic influences. Demographics are the distribution of the population into a particular room with factors that influence it (Sonny Harry B. Harmadi, 2008). As mentioned earlier, this art has developed and spread in various regions in Palembang. The Bangsawan theater flourished and to this day only about ten groups still carry out artistic activities. The group spread and developed not only around or near the Musi river, but also in places far from the city center. Although both are located in Palembang, the difference in the growing space of art is what underlies the assumption that both will represent different forms or characters. The difference that arises clearly as a result of differences in the space for growth and development of culture in this case is the Bangsawan theater. Based on this description, it is very interesting to investigate further, how the existence of the Bangsawan Theater is viewed from a demographic aspect so that its development is known.

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### RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in solving problems in this research is a qualitative method is a research approach that focuses on in-depth understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Muhammad Rijal Fadli, 2021). This method is used to answer more complex research questions in understanding the social, cultural, and psychological context surrounding the phenomenon. This method emphasizes on the interpretation of the subjective meaning given by individuals or groups to the phenomenon. This research uses a variety of flexible and open data collection techniques, such as interviews, participatory observation, case studies, document analysis, or direct observation. The main focus in this method is on the context, experiences, and perspectives of the individuals or groups involved in the research. The general steps that have been carried out in this qualitative research method include: (1) Formulation of Research Questions; The first step is to formulate a research question that will be answered through qualitative research. This research question is carried out in an open and in-depth manner, so that researchers can explore complex and diverse aspects of the phenomenon under study. (2) Research Design; Qualitative research requires a research design that matches the research question and the goals to be achieved (Amir Hamzah, 2019). The design of this study includes the selection of data collection techniques, such as interviews, observations, or case studies, as well as the selection of relevant participants. (3) Data Collection; The data collection stage involves the application of selected data collection techniques in the research design. This includes interviews with participants, direct observation of situations or activities, analysis of documents or archives, and data collection through online interactions. (4) Data Analysis; Once the data is collected, the next step is to analyze the data using a qualitative approach. This analysis process involves reducing the data that has been collected, organizing that data, looking for emerging patterns and findings, and developing relevant themes or categories. (4) Interpretation and Findings; This stage involves interpretation and understanding of the data that has been analyzed. Researchers identify and interpret the findings that emerge from data analysis, and seek to understand the subjective meaning contained therein. These findings are then used to formulate conclusions and research implications. Qualitative research methods have strengths in gain an in-depth understanding of contexts, experiences, and perspectives individual or group. This method allows researchers to explore complex and subjective aspects of the phenomenon under study, and makes an important contribution in understanding the complexity of the social and cultural world.

Meanwhile, the analysis is carried out interactively. Interactive analysis in research refers to an approach that involves direct interaction between the researcher and the data being analyzed. This method allows researchers to dig deeper into and understand data, by gaining richer and more complex insights. The following interactive analysis patterns are presented in the diagram of the relationship between data collection, data reduction, verification to data presentation.



**Figure 2. Interactive analysis of the relationship between data collection, data reduction, verification and presentation of data. (Source: Aan Sudarwanto, 2021)**

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Palembang City is one of the oldest cities in Indonesia. If referring to the Kedukan Bukit inscription found in 1929, Palembang City is quite identical to Srivijaya which was founded by Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa and mentioned in the inscription (Syarifuddin, et al. 2022). The inscription of 604 Saka or 682 in the Gregorian calendar explains that the city of Palembang is currently 1,340 years old. It explained that the long journey of the city of Palembang began during the time of the great kingdom in the archipelago, namely Srivijaya, which was then replaced by the Palembang Sultanate in the era of Islamic glory. In addition, the journey of Palembang was also colored by the presence of the Dutch East Indies colonial government around the beginning of the 19th century and the Japanese occupation around 1942. Palembang is the largest city part of the South Sumatra province which is geographically directly adjacent to Banyuasin Regency in the north, east, and west. In the southern

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part of the city it is directly bordered by Muara Enim Regency and Ogan Ilir Regency. Referring to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Palembang City, the area of Palembang is recorded to cover 400.61 KM<sup>2</sup> (Source: BPS Data 2022). The existence of Palembang becomes a strategic area because of the Sumatran crossing route that connects various regions on the island of Sumatra. The existence of the route makes the city one of the main crossing points for the flow of mobilization and migration on the island of Sumatra. Palembang area is included in the category of metropolitan cities that have a high population density.

Palembang has many tributaries that spread throughout the city. The river, which was previously the main transportation access, now partially seems to be replaced by land transportation due to infrastructure development in the form of highways. Changes and shifts in that role are implications for the progress and development of transportation technology. Previously through the rivers in Palembang there was a flow of mobilization and migration of people from one point to another, from the center of Palembang which is also called *Ihiran* goes to various areas at the end of the flow of tributaries which are also referred to as *uluan*.

Changes in mobility and migration patterns that previously followed river flow patterns, in its development have changed after the development of land transportation access in Palembang. The construction of highways in the colonial era, cross-provincial routes that pass through Palembang, routes between regencies and cities, sub-district lines, and so on. These routes slowly began to shift the role of rivers as the main access to transportation. If previously the mobility and migration of people following the flow from the center of interaction, namely the Musi river as an ilir area to the upstream area in the form of tributaries, or vice versa. The development of community mobility patterns shifts following the pattern of building highway access from the city center to the villages, or vice versa. Before the highway was built, the existence of the river was quite vital for the people in Palembang, one of which was that the people of Palembang really depended on the existence of the Musi river (Rahman in Syarifuffin, et al., 2022: 18). Interaction, trade, and friendship in life between communities in the Palembang area rely a lot on the existence of rivers as the main route. Not only mobility and migration have changed as an implication of development, but the pattern of population settlement has also changed following the pattern of development that occurs. The river that used to be a place to live for some Palembang people by making houses on rafts. In its development, the pattern changed, the community no longer built houses on rafts, but followed the pattern of building road access by building permanent dwelling houses on the land even though it is currently there are still several raft houses around the Musi river. The existence of highways does not completely change the function of the rivers that stretch along the Palembang area. Because of the fact that to this day there are still people who use rivers as transportation access, including being a space for interaction and integration in the context of trade.

The large role and function of the river for the life of the people of Palembang can be seen from the long history of the development of the city. Viewed from historical aspects, Palembang is also known as one of the oldest maritime cities in Indonesia. Some historical records, its development includes the heyday of the Srivijaya Kingdom, the period of the kingdom or Palembang Sultanate, the colonial period, and the independence period until now which has never been separated from the existence of trading ports located in the Musi river. Reviewing the trajectory of Palembang's development period in research is an effort to see the function of rivers in Palembang contributing to the development of its social and cultural areas. As the main route of transportation to the emergence of trade centers which also explain the establishment of interaction centers in people's lives. See the development of the city Palembang in every era in the context of this research, was carried out to find a common thread regarding the role of rivers in the emergence of the phenomenon of Bangsawan theater in Palembang. In addition, understanding the Palembang area is an effort to explain the relationship between cultural spaces and art entities that develop in the lives of its people. Because every art entity as a form of culture will always be a representation of the life of its people.

The existence of aristocratic theater that emerged from the life of the people of Palembang was the impact of the existence of a center of interaction and trade in Palembang. Musi River became one of the destinations and interactions for traders. There was interaction between traders both from India, the Middle East, as well as from Persia and Europe. This situation then opened up opportunities for traders to make cultural exchanges. Where the art of aristocratic theater, brought to almost all Malay plains, one of which is the Palembang region.

The Bangsawan theater in its journey, spread not only in one place in Palembang. As mentioned earlier, this art has developed and spread in various regions in Palembang. The Bangsawan theater flourished and to this day only about ten groups still carry out artistic activities. The group spread and developed not only around or near the Musi river, but also in places far from the city center. Although both are located in Palembang, the difference in the growing space of art is what underlies the assumption that both will represent different forms or characters. The difference that arises clearly as a result of differences in the space for growth and development of culture in this case is the Bangsawan theater.

Palembang culturally knows the trichotomy of cultural areas, including the city of Palembang, *uluan* Palembang, *iliran* Palembang (Jeroen Peeters, 1997: 35). In this regional division, the center of government, namely the city of Palembang, is an exclusive area analogous to the center of government, interaction, information, and civilization. The *iliran* region is a cultural area that is 'near' the center of power, government, information, interaction, namely the center of Palembang, while the *uluan* Palembang is a cultural area that receives current flow power, policies, information, etc. from the city of Palembang. The



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*iliran* region is considered much more dynamic than *uluan* due to topographic factors. *Uluan* in the form of hills is considered unable to absorb various information as a whole from the city of Palembang (Dedi Irwanto Muhammad Santun, 2011: 92). The *iliran* area in this context becomes a connecting lowland area, which connects the city of Palembang with the *uluan* region. Areas that are far from the city of Palembang or considered remote are referred to as *uluan* areas.

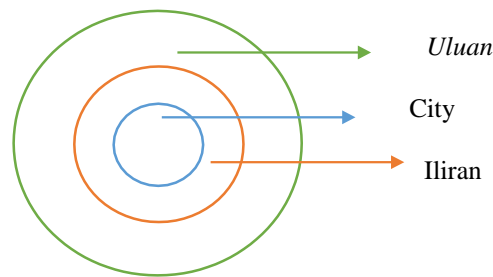


Figure 3. The Concept of Space Trichotomy: Palembang, *Uluan*, and *Iliran*

In its development, the concept of trichotomy was considered no longer relevant, due to the development of the region administratively in the discussion of Palembang. Referring to some opinions, the Palembang region or the former Palembang Karisidenan culturally only knows the dichotomy of cultural areas. The two cultural areas known and developed to this day are *iliran* and *uluan*. Discussing Palembang as a locus in this study is an effort to describe the cultural background of material objects. In its implementation, this study does not try to explain the overall condition of Palembang in detail. The depiction of Palembang in the context of this study is narrowed into two sub-districts, namely Seberang Ulu II and Gandus as the reality of the concepts of *iliran* and *uluan*. The discussion of the two spaces or regions, aims to explain the contextual aspects of the art of aristocratic theaters. This shrinking is done related to the selection of objects/material sampled in the study in an effort to generalize the character of *khadam* characters in the Bangsawan theater in Palembang. The characteristic of *khadam* in the Bangsawan theater in Palembang, is a process to analyze the outcentric character in Palembang's cultural space. The effort was carried out by determining samples that could represent the two cultural areas in Palembang, namely *iliran* and *uluan*. Cultural characteristics of both regions, which are considered to represent both concepts of cultural space in Palembang today (*uluan* and *iliran*).

The spread of various information flows and changes, including to the Uluan and Iliran regions, has had an impact on the existence of Bangsawan theaters. Bangsawan theatre is a form of performing arts traditionally associated with upper social class and wealth. However, with the flow of more accessible information and changes in social values, the theater of nobility has undergone changes in several ways. One of the main impacts is demographic change. In the past, aristocratic theaters could only be enjoyed by elites who could afford expensive tickets. However, with the development of technology and greater accessibility to various art forms, aristocratic theater was no longer limited to the upper classes. Now, more people from different social backgrounds can enjoy aristocratic theatrical performances through television, the internet, or more financially affordable performances. In addition, the content of the aristocratic theater has also undergone changes. In some cases, the stories and themes raised in aristocratic theatrical performances have become more relevant to the issues faced by modern society. Some aristocratic theaters also adapted by incorporating new elements such as advanced technology, dance, music, and the use of more modern languages to appeal to a wider audience. This change does not mean that the traditional aristocratic theater has disappeared completely. There are still Bangsawan theater performances that maintain the authenticity and elegance of the tradition. However, changes in information flows and shifts in social values have affected the existence of aristocratic theater, making it more inclusive and conforming to the times. Overall, the spread of various information flows and changes has affected the existence of the Bangsawan theater with democratization, changes in content, and adaptation to changes in social values. The Bangsawan theater still remains

became an art form of historical and cultural value, but is now more open and relevant to modern society.

## CONCLUSION

Teater Bangsawan is one of the traditional performing arts forms that has a long history in various countries, including Indonesia. The existence of Bangsawan theater can be viewed from demographic aspects involving aspects such as social groups, cultural background, and demographic development of the population. The Bangsawan Theatre originally developed as entertainment for certain social groups, especially the nobility and the royal family. These performances are often attended by social elites who have access and interest in the performing arts. However, along with the times, aristocratic theater has also become an entertainment accessible to various social groups. The Bangsawan Theatre has strong cultural roots in the society in which they flourished. For example, in Indonesia, aristocratic theater is closely related to Javanese culture, as seen in wayang orang

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performances. However, aristocratic theater also existed in different forms in other countries, such as opera in Europe or kabuki in Japan. Therefore, the cultural background of a society will affect the existence and development of the Bangsawan Theater in it.

The demographic development of the population can also affect the existence of the Bangsawan Theater. Changes in age composition, increased urbanization, and shifts in cultural values can have an impact on people's interest and participation in traditional performing arts. For example, with the onset of significant demographic changes, the Bangsawan Theatre may experience a decline in popularity due to younger generations being more interested in modern forms of entertainment. In recent years, the Gentry Theatre has experienced challenges in maintaining its existence. The development of the modern entertainment industry and changing lifestyles have made people's interest in traditional theater decline. However, efforts to preserve this cultural heritage continue through various initiatives, such as the Bangsawan Theatre festival and the revitalization of traditional performances.

The existence of the Bangsawan Theatre is a phenomenon that has significant historical value. In a historical context, the Bangsawan Theatre is one form Traditional theater that developed in Indonesia from the 19th century to the early 20th century. Teater Bangsawan has strong cultural roots and is influenced by various cultural elements, including elements from Chinese, Indian, Javanese, and European cultures. The Bangsawan Theatre first emerged in the late 19th century as a form of entertainment for urban communities mixed from various ethnic backgrounds. Teater Bangsawan's performances at that time combined elements of theatre, music, dance, and mime, and used different languages, such as Malay, Hokkien, Javanese, and Dutch. As a traditional form of theatre, Teater Bangsawan plays an important role in the development of performing arts in Indonesia. Their performances often feature traditional or mythological stories, as well as introduce cultural and moral values to the audience. In addition, the Bangsawan Theatre also acts as a place for artists to develop their skills in theater, music, and dance. In its development, the Bangsawan Theater underwent various changes and adjustments. During the Dutch colonial period, the Bangsawan Theatre began to adopt elements of European theater, such as the use of more complex stages, lights, and properties.

This development led the Bangsawan Theatre towards modernization and a change in the form of their performances. However, along with the times and the emergence of new forms of entertainment, the existence of the Bangsawan Theater slowly began to shift. The decline in audience interest and the cultural changes that occurred resulted in a decline in the popularity of the Bangsawan Theater. Currently, Teater Bangsawan has become part of Indonesia's cultural heritage that needs to be preserved and maintained (Ahmad Alim Wijaya, 2022). In the context of demography, the Bangsawan Theatre provides valuable information about the development of the performing arts, intercultural relations, and social and cultural changes that have occurred over the years. Its existence is also a clear proof of how performing arts can be a means of expression and identity for a society. Thus, from a demographic aspect, the existence of the Bangsawan Theatre has an important record in understanding the changes and dynamics of society towards cultural heritage.

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