

Performing Spirit and Space: A Contemporary Minangkabau Concepts in a Staging of *Resam* (2024)

Muhammad Amirul Shafiq Mohd Tahar*, Nur Afifi Mohamed Taib

Faculty Film, Theatre and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how contemporary Minangkabau concepts are reinterpreted and embodied in site-specific theatre. Drawing from Minangkabau cosmology, matrilineal traditions, and symbolic spatial practices, the discussion situates the spiritual not merely as heritage but as a living, dynamic resource within contemporary performance-making. Through the lens of *Resam* (2024), the paper examines how site-specific works activate non-traditional spaces, transforming them into performative landscapes where spiritual knowledge, memory, and embodiment intersect. The analysis highlights how contemporary Minangkabau performance negotiates between tradition and innovation, embedding indigenous philosophies within global discourses of site-specific theatre by engaging with both creative processes and audience reception. The article argues that the integration of contemporary Minangkabau concepts in site-specific theatre contributes to decolonial approaches to performance, positioning spiritual knowledge as central to reimagining theatre practices in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Site-specific theatre; Spirituality; Minangkabau; *Silat*; Decoloniality

INTRODUCTION

Site-specific Minangkabau Theatre

In recent years, site-specific theatre has appeared as a vital form of performance making that disrupts conventional theatrical boundaries by engaging with space, place, and community. Unlike proscenium-based productions, site-specific performances activate to non-traditional venues such as heritage buildings, open landscapes or communal spaces transforming them into performative environments that shape both dramaturgy and audience experience. This mode of performance has gained increasing attention in Southeast Asia, where performance turns to indigenous epistemologies and cultural frameworks as resources for reimagining contemporary theatre. Within this broader context, Minangkabau concepts provide a rich site of inquiry, particularly in their emphasis on spiritual as an integral part of cultural life, social organization, and spatial practices.

Minangkabau

The Minangkabau people of West Sumatra are renowned for their matrilineal kinship system, distinct architectural forms and deep-rooted philosophies that situate human life in relation to nature and the spiritual realm. The proverb *alam takambang jadi guru* literally “nature unfolds to become the teacher” underscores an epistemology in which the environment is not merely a backdrop but an active source of knowledge, ethics, and spirituality. Likewise, the guiding principle *adat basandi syarak, syarak Basandi Kitabullah* situates Minangkabau customary Law (*adat*) within a spiritual and religious framework, fusing tradition and belief into a holistic worldview. These concepts are inherently spatial: the *rumah gadang* (traditional house), for instance is not only a physical structure but a cosmological model that embodies social order, lineage, and spiritual symbolism. In contemporary performance, these philosophies offer a lens through which space can be re-conceptualized as both material and metaphysical.

Resam (2024)

Resam (2024) was stage at the netball court, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Perdana Campus. *Resam* (2024) is a final year project for Bachelor of Arts (honors) Theatre Production students that involve 3 students who were assess. *Resam* (2024) brings a contemporary Minangkabau concept in terms of costumes, sets and props, language and body movements based on Minangkabau martial arts, *silat harimau*. *Resam* (2024) provides a significant platform to examine how contemporary Minangkabau concepts are re-interpreted within site-specific theatre. As a performance that dedicated to experimental and culturally rooted performance practices, *Resam* (2024) brings together performance that interrogate the intersections of tradition, innovation, and locality. The performance featured highlight a conscious negotiation between heritage and contemporaneity, particularly in their use of space as a medium for spiritual expression. By situating performance within landscapes and architectural sites imbued with cultural memory, these works transform theatre into a spatialized dialogue between past and present, sacred, and profane, local, and global.

BACKGROUND

This article will investigate how contemporary Minangkabau spiritual concepts are embodied and spatialized through site-specific performance, focusing on the ways in which performer reimagine tradition for present-day contexts. The argument unfolds across three interconnected concerns. First, it examines how spiritual worldviews inform the dramaturgy of space, shaping the relationships between performers, audiences, and environments. Second, it considers how performances negotiate the tension between cultural heritage and contemporary creativity, highlighting strategies of adaptation, decontextualization, and innovation.

Third, it situates these practices within global discourses on site-specific theatre, suggesting that the integration of indigenous philosophies contributes to a de-colonial approach to performance-making. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to foreground spiritual knowledge as a critical and living resource in contemporary theatre. Rather than treating Minangkabau concepts as static traditions, the performances in *Resam* (2024) show their ongoing relevance in shaping new artistic possibilities. By engaging with spiritual philosophies that emphasize interconnectedness, relationally, and balance, site-specific theatre practitioners are not only staging cultural identity but also proposing alternative frameworks for understanding performance in the twenty-first century.

This article argues that contemporary Minangkabau concepts particularly their spiritual dimensions that offer profound insights into the ways theatre can spatialize belief, memory, and community. Through the spatialization of the spiritual, *Resam* (2024) exemplifies how site-specific performance can act as both cultural preservation and innovation, situating Southeast Asian knowledge systems at the heart of global performance discourse. All title and author details must be in single-column format and must be centered.

Hypothesis

A. Minangkabau Cultural Context and Performance Tradition

The Minangkabau, numbering approximately 4 million in West Sumatra and millions more in the diaspora, are distinguished by their matrilineal kinship system (*adat perpatih*), one of the largest in the world (Sanday 2002). Inheritance and property are passed through women, yet men play vital roles in ritual, politics, and spirituality. This duality has created a distinctive cultural balance that permeates social, architectural, and artistic forms. Performance is integral to this cultural matrix. Minangkabau oral traditions *kaba* (storytelling), *saluang* (flute-based narrative singing), and *dendang* (epic songs), embody ancestral knowledge and are performed in communal settings. These forms transmit values, histories, and spiritual philosophies across generations. *Randai*, the best-known Minangkabau folk theatre, exemplifies this synthesis of narrative, movement, and cosmology. Performed in the round, *Randai* combines martial arts (*silat*), dance, music, and storytelling into a collective performance that erases boundaries between actors and audiences (Cohen 2003). The circular staging reflects the Minangkabau's emphasis on collectivity, balance, and the cyclical nature of life. It is also deeply tied to matrilineal structures, as *Randai* often dramatizes moral lessons about family, community, and justice. Yet, as scholars note, *Randai* and other traditions have undergone transformations. Indrayuda (2014) observes that *Randai* has shifted from being ritual-based community theatre to staged entertainment, particularly in urban and

diaspora contexts. This transformation has prompted concerns about the erosion of spiritual dimensions. At the same time, such shifts create opportunities for innovation and critical engagement, as artists reclaim cosmology in contemporary theatre practices.

B. Spirituality in Southeast Asian Theatre

The spiritual dimension of performance is not unique to Minangkabau but resonates across Southeast Asia. Turner's (1982) concept of liminality moments of suspension between the ordinary and the sacred helps explain how theatre often functions as ritual in this context. Schechner (2013) further theorizes performance as "restored behavior," emphasizing its ritualized and repeatable nature. Among the Bajau, for instance, the *igal panangsang* ritual involves trance-dance in which performers embody ancestral or oceanic spirits. Abdul Rahman et al. (2023) note that ritual props, chanting, and movement create a shared spiritual environment where performer and audience enter a "unity of being." This example illustrates how spirituality is enacted, a not symbolized perspective crucial to understanding Minangkabau performance. Such performances reveal a broader Southeast Asian performance ecology where spiritual knowledge is embedded in gestures, rhythms, and spatial practices. This contrasts with Western traditions, where theatre is often understood as representation. For Southeast Asian forms, theatre is transformation: an event was human, ancestral, and cosmic relations are renegotiated through embodied practice.

C. Site-specific Theatre and Space as Cosmology

The rise of site-specific theatre in Euro-American contexts has been closely associated with performance studies discourses of the 1980s and 1990s (Kaye 2000; Pearson 2010). Defined as performance inseparable from its spatial context, site-specific works activate historical, architectural, and environmental dimensions of place. However, indigenous perspectives on space complicate and expand this notion. For the Minangkabau, space is not neutral but cosmological. Traditional houses (*rumah gadang*) are designed to reflect balance between matrilineal and patrilineal forces, with architectural orientations tied to spiritual principles. Communal courtyards, rice fields, and mountains are imbued with ancestral presences. Thus, when a performance like *Resam* (2024) engages non-traditional spaces, it does not simply "use" them but activates their spiritual and ancestral resonances. This raises critical questions: How does site-specific performance theory change when site itself is cosmological? How do indigenous epistemologies challenge Eurocentric frameworks of performance? These questions form the theoretical heart of this article.

D. Decolonial Aesthetic in Performance

Recent debates in performance studies have emphasized the need for decolonial approaches. Mignolo & Walsh (2018) argue that decoloniality requires not only political critique but also aesthetic transformation, where indigenous knowledge systems generate new forms of expression. In theatre, decolonial aesthetics means rethinking dramaturgy, space, and embodiment from within indigenous frameworks rather than adapting Eurocentric models. As Taylor (2003) reminds us, performance is a vital "repertoire" of embodied memory that resists the archive's colonial epistemologies. For the Minangkabau, this repertoire includes matrilineal rituals, cosmological narratives, and embodied spiritual practices. *Resam* (2024) offers a case study for how decolonial aesthetics can manifest: not by rejecting global theatre discourses, but by reorienting them through the epistemic authority of Minangkabau cosmology.

METHODOLOGY, VARIABLES AND DATA

This study employs performance ethnography as both method and theory (Conquergood, 2002). Rather than treating performance as text to be analyzed, performance ethnography emphasizes embodied participation, dialogic engagement, and the ethics of presence. My approach involved attending rehearsals and performances of *Resam* (2024), taking part in informal discussions with artists, and observing the ways performers and audiences inhabited the space. Because site-specific performance is inseparable from location, spatial analysis was central to this research. I conducted site visits prior to and during performances, noting orientations, boundaries, and material conditions of the spaces used. I also examined how Minangkabau cosmological principles (e.g., east-west orientation, circularity, communal gathering) informed performance design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the director and several performers. These conversations focused on the creative process, the role of spiritual knowledge in rehearsal, and intentions behind spatial choices. In

addition, I gathered oral histories from older Minangkabau community members to situate the production within longer trajectories of performance practice. Audience engagement was analyzed through post-performance conversations, informal surveys, and observation of bodily responses (movement, stillness, participation). Because site-specific performance often blurs the line between spectator and participant, audience reception was treated not as passive consumption but as co-creation of meaning. Given the sacred dimensions of spirituality, ethical sensitivity was paramount. Ritual elements were not documented in detail beyond what performers consented to share. Respect for community boundaries and spiritual protocols guided the research process.

Analysis

A. Spirituality as Living, Embodied Resource

One of the most striking features of *Resam* (2024) was the way spirituality appeared not as static heritage but as an embodied and dynamic resource. From the opening moments, the performance foregrounded spiritual presence. Instead of beginning with theatrical exposition, performers initiated the work with invocations that referenced ancestral presences, aligning the performance with ritual protocols of greeting the unseen before starting the performance. This was not presented as a spectacle for audiences to “watch,” but as an act of spiritual acknowledgement that the performance itself could not proceed without. Here, Schechner’s (2013) notion of “restored behavior” is instructive: these invocations drew from ritual forms familiar to Minangkabau cultural practice, yet they were decontextualized in a theatrical frame. Their function was not merely aesthetic but ontologically they acknowledged that performance is always already taking place in a spiritually saturated world. The performers’ bodies became vessels of spiritual transmission. Martial gestures derived from *silat* which are based on original *silat harimau* were slowed down, fragmented, repeated and reconstructed to allow performers to embody both the discipline of combat and the serenity of spiritual meditation. Each gesture carried layers of significance: as combat movement, as ritual invocation, and as theatrical choreography. The body thus worked as a site of layered cosmology, simultaneously ancestral, spiritual, and contemporary. This approach challenges the reduction of spirituality to “tradition” or “heritage.” Rather than treating ancestral knowledge as something to be preserved in static form, *Resam* (2024) activated spirituality as a living practice. The dramaturgy of the performance was not built upon a written script but upon sequences of embodied spiritual actions, emphasizing that memory and knowledge in Minangkabau concepts are carried in the body. This aligns with Taylor’s (2003) argument that the “repertoire” of embodied knowledge often resists the fixity of the archive.

B. Spatialization of Knowledge

The defining innovation in *Resam* (2024) performance lay in its spatial dramaturgy. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, *Resam* (2024) was staged in a series of sport sites which designed from netball court to silat court with open landscape. This sport site was selected not for logistical convenience but for its cosmological resonance.



Fig. 1 Performance area and audience area that shown to be a central for the performance.

For example, in fig. 1, the central performance sequence unfolded in a communal courtyard, with the audience seated in surrounding performance area. This circular staging directly echoed Randai performance traditions (Cohen 2003), where the circle symbolizes equality, continuity, and matrilineal cohesion. Yet, *Resam* (2024), did not replicate Randai as total performance but, it reinterpreted circularity as a spiritual choreography of community, situating performers and audiences within the same cosmological field.

Spatial orientation was equally significant. Certain sequences were aligned with the east–west axis, invoking cycles of sunrise and sunset, life, and death. Performers moved in patterns that traced these axes, effectively mapping cosmological principles onto the performance space. The result was that the site itself became a cosmological map, transforming ordinary space, netball court into a performance landscape using Minangkabau concepts. According to Pearson’s (2010) he stated that understanding of site-specific performance as “inseparable from place” takes on new meaning. In Euro-American contexts, site is often understood historically or architecturally. In *Resam* (2024), site was cosmological: the performance did not simply “respond” to a location but revealed the ancestral and spiritual layers already embedded in it. Thus, performance became a process of spatializing spiritual knowledge making visible the otherwise invisible dimensions of place.

Audience reception reflected this. Many described feeling that they were “drawn into the space” or “part of a ritual journey,” rather than attending a theatrical spectacle. This proves how spatial dramaturgy in *Resam* (2024) functioned to dissolve distinctions between performance and environment, audience, and performer and secular.

C. Negotiating Tradition and Innovation

A central tension in *Resam* (2024) was the negotiation between supporting traditional forms and innovating for contemporary contexts. This negotiation was not framed as a binary but as a dynamic interplay. On one hand, *Resam* (2024) incorporated recognizable elements of Minangkabau tradition: Randai-style circular staging, martial gestures from *silat harimau* and the use of oral storytelling motifs. These elements anchored the performance in a recognizable cultural repertoire, ensuring continuity with ancestral practice. On the other hand, these elements were often disrupted, fractured, or juxtaposed with contemporary theatrical strategies. In fig. 2, for instance, *silat harimau* and Randai movements sequences were deconstructed into new choreography, creating moments of abstraction reminiscent of postmodern dance. Oral storytelling was interspersed with silence, repetition, and fragmented speech, destabilizing narrative coherence.



Fig. 2 Silat Harimau movements deconstructed from the Minangkabau traditional martial arts.

This interplay created productive tensions. Audiences were never allowed to rest comfortably in the familiarity of tradition, nor were they alienated by wholesale rejection of cultural forms. Instead, they were invited to inhabit a liminal space where tradition and innovation coexisted. Turner’s (1982) concept of liminality helps explain this: *Resam* (2024) created a threshold where the old and the new, the ritual and the theatrical, could encounter one another without resolution. From a decolonial perspective, this negotiation resists the trap of “folklorist,” where indigenous forms are frozen as heritage for consumption. Instead, *Resam* (2024) showed that tradition is a resource for contemporary innovation. By reworking spiritual gestures into new forms, the

performance refused both nostalgia and assimilation, carving out decolonial aesthetic that honors ancestry while embracing experimentation.

DISCUSSION

The Spiritual as Dramaturgical Principles:

Whereas Western dramaturgy often privileges narrative, character, or psychological realism, *Resam* (2024) foregrounds the spiritual as dramaturgical principle. The structuring of the performance was less concerned with linear storytelling and more attuned to cycles of invocation, offering, and return. This cyclical dramaturgy mirrored cosmological rhythms, particularly those associated with sunrise and sunset, continuity, and transformation. By placing spirituality at the core of dramaturgy, *Resam* (2024) shifts attention from representation to transmission. Performers were not merely representing Minangkabau culture for an audience but transmitting embodied spiritual knowledge through movement, orientation, and presence. In this sense, dramaturgy functioned as a process of knowledge circulation, where what was passed on was not a narrative but a way of being and perceiving. This challenges secular assumptions embedded in much of performance studies. As scholars such as Balme (2015) and Pavis (2017) note, theatre history has often marginalised ritual and spirituality as pre-modern or non-theatrical. *Resam* (2024) contests this by showing that the spiritual can work as a contemporary aesthetic strategy, one capable of innovating and expanding theatrical form.

Tradition as Resource, Not Relic:

One of the recurring insights from *Resam* (2024) is the refusal to treat tradition as a relic. Instead, Minangkabau practices Randai circularity, silat harimau gestures, ritual invocation was mobilised as resources for innovation. They were not replicated for authenticity nor abandoned in favour of globalized aesthetics. Rather, they were refracted, reconfigured, and layered into a hybrid dramaturgy. This aligns with contemporary debates in indigenous performance studies, where tradition is increasingly understood as a living archive (Taylor 2003) rather than a frozen heritage. *Resam* (2024) proves that traditions survive not by preservation alone but by continual re-imagination. Each reinterpretation is a negotiation: how to remain accountable to ancestry while speaking to contemporary concerns. In this negotiation, *Resam* (2024) not totally change the heritage or culture but reconstruct from the base of Minangkabau culture toward the process by which cultural forms are commodified as heritage for tourism or state recognition. Instead, the performance insists on the contemporaneity of Minangkabau people practice, insisting that Minangkabau concepts are not historical remnants but ongoing, dynamic contributions to global performance discourse.

Reframing Site-Specificity through Indigenous Cosmologies:

The analysis of *Resam* (2024) suggests that site-specific theatre in Southeast Asia cannot reduced to Euro-American frameworks of locality, architecture, or community history (Pearson 2010 & Kaye 2000). While those frameworks are still useful, *Resam* (2024) highlights how indigenous cosmologies fundamentally reshape the meaning of “site” and use any of site as a performance space by adding cultural concepts. In Minangkabau performance, site is not merely a geographical or historical space, but a cosmological field inhabited by both human and non-human presences. This reconceptualization expands performance theory. When Pearson (2010) argues that sites are “inseparable” from the performances they host, the assumption is often historical or material. *Resam* (2024) shows that “inseparability” can also be ontological: space is alive, spiritually charged, and activated through performance. The performance reoriented audiences to experience site not only as landscape but as sacred terrain—a place where ancestral presence, communal memory, and spiritual knowledge converge. Such a reframing has implications for global discourses on site-specificity. It destabilizes the universalization of Western models and highlights the necessity of attending to indigenous epistemologies of space. In doing so, *Resam* (2024) takes part in a broader decolonial project (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000), where knowledge of performance is provincialized and pluralized.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Resam* (2024) demonstrates how contemporary Minangkabau concepts particularly cosmology, matrilineality, and spiritual practice can be mobilised as central resources in site-specific theatre. By

analysing its dramaturgy, spatial design, and audience dynamics, the article has highlighted three keys' contributions:

1. **Reframing site-specificity:** It shifts the discourse beyond Western notions of site as architectural or historical, proposing instead a model where site is cosmological, spiritually inhabited, and activated through performance.
2. **Foregrounding spirituality in dramaturgy:** Rather than reducing spiritual as symbolic content, *Resam* (2024) treats it as a structural principle that shapes temporality, movement, and collective experience.
3. **Negotiating tradition and innovation:** Tradition emerges not as a static relic but as a living archive, enabling creative experimentation while remaining accountable to ancestry.

Taken together, these interventions contribute to performance studies by offering a theoretical framework in which indigenous philosophies are not ancillary but foundational to contemporary theatre making. This directly advances decolonial aesthetics by unsettling Euro-American paradigms that have long dominated discourse and by positioning local epistemologies as generative sites of theory and practice.

The significance of this study lies in showing that *Resam* (2024) does not merely adapt indigenous elements into contemporary performance but actively reorients the field toward decolonial methodologies, where spirituality, ancestry, and place are central to artistic creation. In doing so, it expands the vocabulary of performance studies, situates Southeast Asian traditions within global debates, and models how theatre can function as a convergence of ancestral knowledge and contemporary creativity.

Future research could deepen these insights by undertaking comparative studies with other Southeast Asian traditions, examining audience reception across diverse communities, and theorising dramaturgies explicitly grounded in indigenous cosmologies. The study of *Resam* (2024) demonstrates that the future of site-specific theatre may depend not on the adoption of globalised forms, but on the cultivation of decolonial aesthetics rooted in local epistemologies of performance.

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