POETRY AS CULTURAL PRACTICE: MORAL VALUES AND SOCIAL MEANING IN MALAY PANTUN AND ARABIC QASIDA

Rahmah Ahmad H. Osman[1*], Nurul Syariah Mohd Yusof[2], Md. Salleh Yaapar[3], Adham Hamawiya Ali[4], Aisyah Aminah Che Amran[5]

[1] Department of Arabic Language and Literature, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia
Email: rahmahao@iium.edu.my

[2] Department of Arabic Language and Literature, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia
Email: nurulsyariah25@gmail.com

[3] Faculty of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia
Email: mdsalleh@usm.my

[4] Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO)
Email: adham.hamawiya@icesco.org

[5] Department of Arabic Language and Literature, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia
Email: aaworkiium@gmail.com

[*] Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Abstract:

Traditional poetic forms have long functioned as vital cultural instruments through which societies articulate moral values, regulate social behaviour, and preserve collective memory. In both Malay and Arab cultures, poetry occupies a central position not merely as an aesthetic expression but as a socially embedded practice that mediates communal relationships and ethical norms. This study offers a comparative analytical examination of pantun in Malay literature and qasida in Arabic literature, focusing on their social and cultural functions within their respective societies. Drawing on qualitative textual analysis and informed by theories of literature as social practice and cultural memory, the study analyses selected pantun and qasida texts to identify patterns of moral instruction, social communication, and identity formation. The findings reveal that despite substantial differences in form, length, and stylistic convention, pantun and qasida perform analogous social roles as vehicles of ethical guidance, communal cohesion, and cultural continuity. While pantun conveys values through metaphorical and indirect expression rooted in Malay ideals of politeness and harmony, qasida articulates moral and cultural authority through rhetorical elaboration and explicit exhortation grounded in Arab historical and religious consciousness. By situating these poetic traditions within a shared analytical framework, the study contributes to

comparative literature and cultural studies by demonstrating how culturally distinct literary forms respond to similar social needs and remain relevant in contemporary contexts.

Introduction

Literature has historically functioned as a central medium through which societies articulate values, negotiate social relationships, and preserve collective memory. In many non-Western traditions, poetry occupies a privileged position as a form of cultural expression that is inseparable from social life. Rather than serving solely aesthetic purposes, poetic forms often operate as social practices that encode moral norms, transmit cultural knowledge, and reinforce communal identity (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

Within the Malay and Arab cultural worlds, traditional poetry has played a formative role in shaping ethical consciousness and social communication. In Malay society, pantun represents one of the most enduring poetic forms, deeply rooted in oral tradition and everyday social interaction. Characterised by brevity, metaphorical imagery, and indirect expression, pantun functions as a culturally sanctioned mode of conveying advice, criticism, and moral guidance while maintaining social harmony (budi bahasa) and interpersonal respect (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018; Adnan & Pillai, 2020). Its continued use in ceremonies, negotiations, and communal gatherings underscores its role as a living social practice rather than a static literary artefact.

In Arabic literary tradition, the qasida occupies a similarly central yet structurally distinct position. As one of the oldest and most influential poetic forms in Arabic literature, the qasida has historically served as a medium for articulating collective identity, moral authority, and cultural memory. Classical qasida often addresses themes of honour, loyalty, praise, and communal values, while later religious and devotional forms emphasise ethical exhortation and spiritual reflection (Stetkevych, 1993; Sperl, 2020). Through its rhetorical authority and extended narrative structure, the qasida positions poetry as a public voice capable of shaping moral discourse within society.

Despite the prominence of pantun and qasida within their respective traditions, scholarly research has largely examined these forms in isolation, focusing primarily on their formal characteristics or historical development. Comparative studies that analyse their social and cultural functions across traditions remain limited, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how traditional poetry operates as a social institution beyond cultural boundaries. This gap is particularly significant given broader theoretical perspectives that emphasise literature's role in sustaining cultural memory and social cohesion (Assmann, 2011).

A comparative approach to pantun and qasida offers valuable insight into how distinct literary traditions respond to shared human and social concerns through culturally specific strategies. While the Malay pantun privileges subtlety and metaphor as tools of moral communication,

the Arabic qasida employs rhetorical elaboration and public address to similar ends. Examining these forms side by side allows for a deeper understanding of literature not merely as text, but as a socially embedded practice shaped by cultural values and historical experience.

This study therefore undertakes a comparative analytical examination of pantun and qasida with the aim of elucidating their social and cultural functions. By drawing on literary sociology and cultural memory theory, the study seeks to demonstrate that traditional poetry across cultures performs parallel roles in moral education, social regulation, and identity formation, while reflecting distinct cultural worldviews. In doing so, it contributes to comparative literature and cultural studies by foregrounding non-Western poetic traditions and reaffirming their continued relevance in contemporary cultural life.

Traditional poetic forms have long served as foundational vehicles for the transmission of social values, moral norms, and collective identity within many non-Western societies. In both Malay and Arab cultures, poetry is not merely an aesthetic artefact but a socially embedded practice that mediates relationships, encodes ethical principles, and preserves cultural memory. Among the most significant poetic forms in these traditions are pantun in Malay literature and qasida in Arabic literature. While each has been extensively studied within its own literary and cultural context, they are rarely examined through a comparative lens that foregrounds their social and cultural functions.

Existing scholarship on pantun has largely focused on its formal structure, metaphorical language, and role in Malay oral tradition, emphasising its function as a medium of indirect communication and social harmony (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018; Adnan & Pillai, 2020). Similarly, studies of the qasida have concentrated on its historical development, rhetorical authority, and religious or political significance within Arab societies (Stetkevych, 1993; Sperl, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, their disciplinary separation limits a broader understanding of how poetic traditions across different cultures may perform analogous social roles.

The research problem addressed in this study lies in the lack of comparative analysis that examines how pantun and qasida, despite differences in form, length, and performance context, function similarly as instruments of moral instruction, social communication, and cultural preservation. Without such comparative inquiry, scholarship risks overlooking shared human and cultural concerns embedded in poetic traditions and underestimating the role of literature as a social institution. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing pantun and qasida as culturally situated poetic forms that respond to comparable social needs within their respective societies.

Literature Review
Scholarly research on Malay literature consistently emphasises the central role of pantun as a form of social communication and ethical expression. Muhammad Haji Salleh (2018) describes pantun as a cultural code that reflects Malay values of politeness, restraint, and communal harmony. Its reliance on metaphor, symbolism, and indirect expression enables speakers to offer advice, criticism, or moral guidance without disrupting social balance. Adnan and Pillai (2020) further argue that pantun functions as a form of social discourse, reinforcing norms related to respect, kinship, and collective responsibility.

In Arabic literary scholarship, the qasida has been extensively studied as a form that articulates cultural authority and collective memory. Stetkevych (1993) demonstrates that the classical qasida functions as a symbolic structure through which Arab societies narrate history, identity, and moral ideals. Similarly, Sperl (2020) highlights the continued relevance of qasida in religious and devotional contexts, where it serves as a medium for ethical exhortation and communal affirmation.

Beyond genre-specific studies, broader theoretical perspectives support a comparative approach to traditional poetry. Wellek and Warren (1956) argue that literature must be understood in relation to its social functions, while Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory provides a framework for analysing how literary texts preserve and transmit shared values. However, few studies have applied these theories to a comparative analysis of Malay and Arabic poetic forms.

By synthesising scholarship from Malay studies, Arabic literary studies, and cultural theory, this study situates pantun and qasida within a shared analytical framework that foregrounds their roles as social and cultural instruments. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in comparative literary research and contributes to a more integrated understanding of traditional poetry across cultures.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the social and cultural functions of pantun in Malay literature and qasida in Arabic literature through a comparative analytical framework. Specifically, the study aims to analyse how both poetic forms operate as mediums of communication, moral guidance, and cultural expression within their communities.

In addition, the study seeks to identify similarities and differences in the ways pantun and qasida convey ethical values, reinforce social norms, and contribute to the formation of collective identity. Another objective is to explore how the structural and stylistic characteristics of each poetic form shape their respective social functions. Through these objectives, the study aims to demonstrate that traditional poetry, despite cultural and formal variation, often performs parallel roles in sustaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant on academic, cultural, and pedagogical levels. Academically, it contributes to the field of comparative literature by bringing Malay and Arabic poetic traditions into direct dialogue, an area that remains underexplored in existing scholarship. By examining pantun and qasida through their social functions rather than solely their aesthetic features, the study advances interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with cultural and social theory (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

Culturally, the study enhances understanding of how traditional poetic forms function as repositories of cultural memory and ethical values. Drawing on cultural memory theory, literature can be seen as a mechanism through which societies preserve and transmit shared meanings across generations (Assmann, 2011). By highlighting the enduring relevance of pantun and qasida, the study underscores the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the face of modernisation and globalisation.

Pedagogically, the findings offer valuable insights for literature and cultural studies curricula by illustrating how poetry can be used to teach moral reasoning, social values, and intercultural awareness. Understanding the social roles of traditional poetry can enrich literary education and foster deeper appreciation of non-Western literary traditions among students.

Methodology
This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, which is particularly suited to exploring literary texts as culturally embedded social practices. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth interpretation of meaning, symbolism, and social function, which are central to the analysis of traditional poetry (Creswell, 2014).

The data for this study consist of selected pantun texts from established Malay literary sources and representative qasida drawn from classical Arabic and Islamic poetic traditions. Texts were selected based on their thematic relevance to social values, moral instruction, and communal identity. The analysis employs thematic and interpretive textual analysis, focusing on how poetic language, imagery, and structure convey social meanings.

A comparative analytical approach is then applied to identify convergences and divergences between pantun and qasida. This approach allows the study to move beyond surface-level comparison and to examine how differing poetic conventions respond to similar social functions. Such a methodology aligns with established practices in comparative literature and cultural studies (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

Findings
The comparative analysis of pantun and qasida indicates that, despite differences in form, length, and performance context, both poetic traditions function as central social and cultural instruments within their respective societies. The corpus analysed in this study comprises selected didactic and social pantun commonly used in communal and ceremonial contexts, alongside classical and religious qasida texts associated with moral exhortation and collective identity. The findings show that pantun and qasida operate as mechanisms for moral instruction, social communication, and the preservation of collective identity, as evidenced by recurring thematic patterns across the analysed texts rather than isolated examples.

One key finding concerns the role of both pantun and qasida as vehicles of moral and ethical guidance. In Malay society, pantun conveys moral values through indirect expression, employing metaphor and symbolic imagery drawn from nature to communicate advice, caution, or criticism without direct confrontation. The analysed pantun consistently encode ethical guidance within figurative language that foregrounds restraint, balance, and social harmony. This mode of expression reflects core Malay cultural values such as politeness (budi bahasa) and communal sensitivity (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018). Ethical themes observed across the texts include respect for elders, humility, and collective responsibility, which are articulated through implicit suggestion rather than explicit moral declaration.

In contrast, the qasida functions as a medium of moral exhortation through more explicit rhetorical strategies. Classical and religious qasida texts examined in this study articulate ethical ideals related to honour, faith, loyalty, and communal obligation, frequently invoking shared religious beliefs and historical references. The findings indicate that moral instruction in qasida is conveyed through praise, admonition, and exemplification, positioning the poetic

voice as a public moral authority. Although the stylistic strategies differ, both traditions demonstrate a consistent concern with regulating ethical conduct within the community (Stetkevych, 1993; Sperl, 2020).

Another significant finding relates to the function of pantun and qasida in social communication and communal interaction. Pantun is embedded in everyday social practices and is commonly performed during weddings, negotiations, and communal gatherings. The analysed pantun texts reveal dialogic structures that facilitate verbal exchange while maintaining social decorum. Through this function, pantun enables communication that strengthens interpersonal bonds and reinforces social cohesion (Adnan & Pillai, 2020).

Similarly, qasida performs a communicative role within more formal and ceremonial contexts, such as religious gatherings and public commemorations. The extended structure of the qasida allows for the elaboration of collective narratives and shared values. The findings show that qasida articulates communal sentiment by framing moral and cultural ideals within collective memory rather than individual experience. In both cases, poetry serves as a culturally sanctioned medium for expressing social meaning and reinforcing group identity.

A further finding concerns the role of pantun and qasida as repositories of cultural memory. The imagery, themes, and narrative structures found in both poetic forms encode historical experience, social norms, and cultural knowledge. Pantun preserves local wisdom and environmental awareness through symbolic language, while qasida often commemorates religious figures, historical events, and collective struggles. Across the analysed texts, cultural memory is sustained through repetition of shared symbols and values rather than narrative chronology, supporting the view of poetry as a mnemonic cultural practice (Assmann, 2011).

Finally, the findings indicate that pantun and qasida retain cultural relevance despite changes in modes of literary transmission. Evidence from contemporary usage contexts referenced in the texts suggests continuity rather than decline in their social functions. While modernisation has influenced performance settings and audience engagement, both poetic forms continue to operate as vehicles of moral instruction and cultural continuity. This persistence indicates functional adaptation rather than obsolescence.

Discussion
The findings of this study support theoretical perspectives that conceptualise literature as a socially embedded practice rather than a purely aesthetic form. When interpreted through the lens of literary sociology, pantun and qasida can be understood as cultural texts whose meanings emerge from their social functions and modes of circulation. Wellek and Warren (1956) argue that literary works gain significance through their relationship with social structures and communal experience. The evidence presented in the Findings indicates that both pantun and qasida operate within socially regulated contexts that shape their ethical and communicative roles. This suggests that poetry in both traditions functions as a form of social mediation rather than autonomous artistic expression.

From the perspective of cultural memory theory, the findings indicate that pantun and qasida serve as symbolic mechanisms for the transmission of shared values across generations. Assmann (2011) emphasises that cultural memory is sustained through recurring symbolic forms that encode collective experience. The analysed texts demonstrate that moral values,

social norms, and historical consciousness are preserved through patterned imagery, thematic repetition, and culturally recognisable symbols. In this sense, pantun and qasida act as repositories of cultural memory, linking individual expression to collective remembrance. This finding extends cultural memory theory by illustrating how poetic form itself functions as a mnemonic structure.

The comparative dimension of the study highlights functional equivalence across culturally distinct literary forms. Although pantun is characterised by brevity, metaphorical indirection, and dialogic exchange, and qasida by rhetorical elaboration and extended narrative, both traditions address similar social needs, including moral regulation, communal cohesion, and identity affirmation. This observation aligns with comparative literature approaches that prioritise function over form in cross-cultural analysis (Wellek & Warren, 1956). The findings therefore refine comparative theory by demonstrating that functional convergence can occur despite substantial formal divergence.

At the same time, the study reveals culturally specific strategies of moral communication. The indirectness of pantun reflects Malay cultural values that privilege social harmony, restraint, and politeness, where ethical guidance is conveyed through suggestion rather than confrontation (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018). Conversely, the rhetorical authority of qasida corresponds to an Arabic poetic tradition in which public moral discourse and communal exhortation are culturally sanctioned. These differences indicate that while moral objectives may be shared, the modes of ethical articulation are shaped by distinct cultural norms. This distinction underscores the importance of contextualising literary function within cultural value systems.

The findings also challenge Eurocentric literary models that emphasise individual creativity and aesthetic autonomy. In both Malay and Arab traditions, poetry is closely integrated with social life, religious values, and communal responsibility. The evidence suggests that literary meaning in these contexts is inseparable from collective experience and social obligation. By foregrounding communal function over individual expression, the study contributes to broader debates in world literature by offering alternative frameworks for understanding literary value beyond Western paradigms.

Finally, the discussion has implications for literary pedagogy and cultural preservation. Interpreting pantun and qasida as social instruments rather than isolated texts allows for a more holistic approach to literary education. The findings indicate that teaching poetry through its social and cultural functions may foster deeper engagement and intercultural understanding. Such an approach reinforces the relevance of traditional poetic forms in contemporary contexts and supports efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that pantun and qasida are best understood as culturally situated practices that mediate moral values, social relations, and collective memory. This synthesis provides a conceptual bridge to the Conclusion, where the study's originality and broader implications are articulated.

Conclusion
This study has undertaken a comparative analytical examination of pantun in Malay literature and qasida in Arabic literature in order to elucidate their social and cultural functions. The

analysis demonstrates that, despite differences in form, length, and stylistic convention, both poetic traditions function as culturally embedded practices that transmit moral values, regulate social behaviour, and sustain collective identity. Rather than approaching these traditions as isolated literary artefacts, the study has foregrounded their operation within lived social contexts.

The findings indicate that pantun conveys ethical guidance through metaphorical indirection and symbolic imagery, reflecting Malay cultural values of politeness, restraint, and social harmony. Its communicative strategy prioritises social balance by embedding moral instruction within figurative language. In contrast, qasida articulates moral and cultural values through rhetorical authority and extended poetic discourse, often invoking shared religious and historical reference points. Through this mode, qasida positions poetry as a public medium for ethical exhortation and communal affirmation. These differences demonstrate that cultural context shapes how moral values are expressed, even when social functions are comparable.

Despite such stylistic divergence, the study reveals a clear functional convergence between pantun and qasida. Both traditions serve as vehicles of moral education, social communication, and cultural continuity within their respective societies. This functional comparison constitutes a key contribution of the study, as it shifts comparative analysis away from form-based evaluation towards social purpose and cultural role. By applying a shared analytical framework, the study demonstrates how culturally distinct poetic forms respond to similar social needs through different expressive strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends literary sociology and cultural memory theory by illustrating how poetic forms themselves function as social instruments. Pantun and qasida operate as symbolic repositories that encode and transmit shared values across generations, thereby sustaining cultural memory (Assmann, 2011). The findings suggest that cultural memory in poetic traditions is maintained not only through content but also through patterned modes of expression that are culturally recognisable and socially reinforced.

The study also contributes to comparative literature by challenging Eurocentric literary models that privilege aesthetic autonomy and individual expression. By foregrounding communal function and social embeddedness, the analysis offers an alternative understanding of literary value rooted in collective experience and ethical responsibility. In doing so, it highlights the importance of incorporating non-Western literary traditions into comparative frameworks on their own conceptual terms.

Future research may build on this study by pursuing focused comparative trajectories, such as examining the transformation of traditional poetic functions in digital environments or extending functional comparison to other regional poetic traditions. Such directions would further illuminate how traditional forms adapt to contemporary contexts while maintaining core social roles.

In conclusion, pantun and qasida exemplify how traditional poetry operates as a dynamic and socially consequential practice. By demonstrating their functional equivalence across cultural boundaries, this study reaffirms the relevance of traditional poetic forms as living instruments of moral guidance, social cohesion, and cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world.

Acknowledgements

References

Adnan, A. H., & Pillai, S. (2020). Pantun as cultural discourse in Malay society. Journal of Malay Studies, 18(2), 45–62.

Allen, R. (2000). An introduction to Arabic literature. Cambridge University Press.

Asmah Haji Omar. (2008). Ensiklopedia bahasa Melayu. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Assmann, J. (2011). Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination. Cambridge University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). Sage.

Damrosch, D. (2003). What is world literature? Princeton University Press.

Eagleton, T. (2008). Literary theory: An introduction (2nd ed.). Blackwell.

Halbwachs, M. (1992). On collective memory. University of Chicago Press.

Muhammad Haji Salleh. (2018). An introduction to Malay literature. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Sperl, S. (2020). Islamic poetry and cultural identity. Edinburgh University Press.

Stetkevych, S. P. (1993). The mute immortals speak: Pre-Islamic poetry and the poetic imagination. Cornell University Press.

Suleiman, Y. (2013). Arabic language and identity. Edinburgh University Press.

Suleiman, Y. (2013). Arabic language and identity. Edinburgh University Press.

Wellek, R., & Warren, A. (1956). Theory of literature. Harcourt, Brace & World.

Za'ba. (2002). Ilmu mengarang Melayu. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.