

Meaning of Symbolical Space of Zapin Dance to Malay People

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to identify the meaning of symbolical space of Zapin Dance to Malay people. Research question includes: (1) What is the symbolization of Zapin Dance to Malay people? and (2) What is the meaning of Zapin Dance to Malay people? Zapin Dance originated from Arab culture that came to Nusantara around the 16th century and became popular when the Malacca Sultanate territories expanded to various regions in Southeast Asia, extending from Malacca Peninsula to Sulawesi. Zapin Dance was genuinely composed for arousing spiritual energy before waging the war. Zapin Dance was performed by a pair of dancers and the expression should be rhythmical and representing togetherness. The Research is qualitative descriptive using Levis Strauss' structuralism theory. Data of research took many forms such as words, statements of experiences, verbal knowledges, and actions. Data were analyzed using textual and contextual interpretations where the subjects will be interpreted denotatively and connotatively. Result of research showed that: (1) Zapin Dance symbolizes social construct of Malay people; and (2) Zapin Dance imparts spiritual meaning to Malay people.

Keywords: Zapin Dance, Symbolical Space, Malay People

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of dance art in Malay people has drawn the interest of the authors. Malay dance art exhales a strong universal identity which dominantly reflects Islam ethnic culture. Malay people, have always been associated with the dissemination of Islam, including through dance art. One popular dance to Malay people is Zapin Dance.

Zapin Dance performed by Malay people originated from Arabian culture [1]. Precise location of Zapin Dance origin is Yaman, one of many regions in Arab Peninsula. This dance was initially presented as a consolation for royal residents in the palace of Siak Sultanate [2].

In the beginning, Zapin Dance was performed in Siak Palace to entertain royal students after they spend hours learning about Islam. Everything changed after Tengku Embung Badariah binti Sultan Abdul Jalil Alamuddin Syah (1766 – 1780 M) married Syarif Utsman bin Syarif Abdul Rahman Syahabuddin

(believed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, precisely from the his daughter, Siti Fatimah, who married Sayidina Ali). While Zapin Dance was not exclusively performed for palace residents, as it was also acculturated with local culture and inaugurated as part of the great tradition, Zapin Dance was officially a part of royal entertainment art and often performed in the ceremony of welcoming the courtesy guests. Therefore, the Zapin Dance is popularly known as the Palace Zapin Dance (Siak Sri Indrapura) [2].

Arabian merchants introduced Zapin Dance from Hadramaut (Yaman) to Johor-Lingga in the 16th century. The merchants brought Zapin Dance into their social activity, which is always Islam-related and aimed for the teaching of Islam. Gujarat merchants made this dance more popular in many regions around Johor-Lingga, along with their trading activities accompanied by the preaching of Islam in every large seaport they visited [3].

In 1824, Zapin Dance received its initial popularity when it was performed in front of royal families in

Johor, Riau and Lingga Kingdoms. Mouth news made Zapin Dance to be heard into various regions in Malay Peninsula, including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. Elly Angraini Soewondo (73 years old) explained that Arabian descents have their own version of Zapin Dance, known as the Arabian Zapin Dance. This dance is performed by two males in a pair. The dance begins with simultaneous moves, continues with shifting the position to front through a straight path, and ends with turning around returning to the early spot. The moves are repeated in correspond with the rhythm of *marawis* drums [4].

Arabian Zapin Dance came to Nusantara in the 16th century and became popular when Malacca Sultanate territories expanded to various regions in Southeast Asia, extending from Malacca Peninsula to Sulawesi. The nature of Arabian Zapin Dance is heroic because it is genuinely composed for arousing spiritual energy before waging the war. This dance must be performed by a pair of dancers and the expression should correspond the rhythm and represents togetherness.

Malay Zapin Dance gained its early fame by following the pattern of Arabian Zapin Dance. As the time went, local creativity and social dynamic of Malay people have affected the dance. The moves of Zapin Dance started to reflect social expression of Malay people, entertaining more dynamic moves possibly due to the concern to entertain the audiences. Initially, The Malay Zapin Dance were not performed by female dancers, and the most possible reason was that the audiences at the time were people with prestige and surely Moslems. After acculturation, however, the dance began to be composed as a choreography involving a pair of male and female. Despite this change, Zapin Dance still focuses on “zapin”, which refers to foot movement [5].

Within the context of Nusantara (the old name of Indonesia), both Arab and Malay versions of Zapin Dance have grown and developed by their respective communities. Arabian Zapin Dance grew and developed in Arab villages. The dance was used to enforce the preaching of Islam, to deepen the faith of the Moslems, and to strengthen social bond among them. Meanwhile, Malay Zapin Dance shows preference to absorb local wisdom [6]. It is, therefore, not surprising if different region where the dance is presented can produce different variant of the dance. The difference can be found in moves, costumes, formation, and aesthetical elements. The absorption of local culture into Malay Zapin Dance is obviously seen in the coastal area of Malacca Peninsula, Sumatera, Kalimantan, Java and Sulawesi [7].

The objective of this research is to identify the meaning of symbolical space of Zapin Dance in Malay people. The research attempts to answer two questions: (1) What is the symbolization of Zapin Dance to Malay

people? and (2) What is the meaning of Zapin Dance to Malay people?

2. METHOD

The research is qualitative descriptive with data taking many forms such as words, statements of experiences, verbal knowledges, and actions. Several informants were involved, including Elly Angraini Soewondo (73 years old), an expert of Zapin Dance who lives in Palembang; Muslim (64 years old), a conservator of Malay dances who domiciles at Riau, Pekanbaru; Effi Raja (54 years old), a dancer and also a choreographer who resides at Riau, Pekanbaru; Datu Norbeck (60 years old), an advisor for Zapin Dance Society of Pagun Taka in Tarakan, North Kalimantan; and Agung Suharyanto (57 years old), a dancer and a choreographer who lives in Medan. Data analysis technique is interpretation based on structuralism theory of Levi Strauss. The model comprises of four requirements, namely: (1) offering the characters of newly proposed system; (2) creating transformation groups; (3) estimating which parts of the old model that should be modified; and (4) constructing the model after observing the subjects [8]. The subjects will be interpreted denotatively and connotatively to expose the inner and outer structures [9].

3. DATA DESCRIPTION

The authors have witnessed the presentation of Zapin Dance at a wedding event held by Arab Village communities in Palembang. This finding was confirmed by Elly Angraini Soewondo (73 years old) who said that Arabian descents in Palembang are the strong conservator of Zapin Dance. Wedding event is the dominant situation that involves Zapin Dance (Soewondo, interview on May 21, 2021).

Arab version of Zapin Dance has simple presentation. Two Arabic words are related to this dance version. One of these two is *Zaffan* which refers to dancer while the other is *Alzapin* which means foot movement [10].

The moves in Zapin Dance are focusing on foot (pace) involving eight counts. The count is divided into two, respectively four counts to pace and four counts to turn around and return (Norbeck, April 15, 2021). Simple pace moves are accompanied by Arabic music (*gambus*) played with *marawis* and violin that must be kept in harmony with *Sholawat Rasul* sung out by the vocalists [11].

Muslim (64 years old) explains the philosophy of Zapin Dance in several words. Zapin comes from Arabic word “*zafn*”, meaning *foot rhythm*, which can only be produced through the agility of the legs

supported by strong thigh. Such moves truly represent the local culture that underlies the genuine concept of Zapin Dance, precisely Arab (Islam) culture. Malay Zapin Dance reflects the understanding of its conserver communities (Malay people) about Islam. Several moves are named with Islam terms such as *Alif*, *Alif Sembah I*, *Alif Sembah II*, *Bunga Alif Pusing I*, and *Bunga Alif Pusing II*. *Alif* is the first letter in Arabic alphabet. The form of this letter is upright, which in this context, it symbolizes straight line. When dancers perform *Alif* move, they move forward on a path like straight line and turn around in 360 degree rotation.

Alif move is the basic of Zapin Dance. Other moves are developed from this basic move, such as *Bunga Alif Pusing I* and *Bunga Alif Pusing II*. Furthermore, *Alif Sembah* is a move aimed to pay homage to the guest (particularly the Sultan). It requires dancers to turn to the right and face back forward, which culminates at a posture of sitting with hands in worship position. The purpose of worship (*sembah*) move is to educate other persons about the importance of mutual respect and courtesy, which both are the vital elements that make up the move. The presence of these elements requires worship move to be expressed aesthetically (Muslim, interview on May 20, 2021)

Arabian descents maintain the originality of Zapin Dance by requiring the dancer to be male. One prominent reason is that this dance is presented as part of Islamic preaching. Agung Suharyanto (57 years old) said that there is a middle area between Arabian Zapin Dance and Malay Zapin Dance, and this area is called *Tajuk Ajar*. In this area, Zapin Dance is functioned as traditional legacy, sustainable moral learning, faith enforcement, and consolation ritual (Suhariyanto, interview on May 20, 2021).

Malay Zapin Dance has extended dynamically from Malacca Peninsula to Makasar. The dance has different names in different regions where it is conserved. Several names that the authors found during the study are *Jipin*, *Jippeng*, *Jepin*, *Jepen*, *Bedana*, *Dana*, or *Dana-Dani* [12].

Apart from having many names, Malay Zapin Dance is a product of transformation from Arabian Zapin Dance which is brought by Gujarat merchants to Malacca Peninsula. This dance helps crystallize the identity of Malay people as known in Nusantara. Before the introduction of Zapin Dance, Malay people were reclusive and hesitant to show their identity possibly because they still profess India-based culture and spirituality that admired ascetic-like social life. At the time, most of Malay people were practicing mystical elements that they inherited from their ancestors who told them that those elements are true representation of local culture [13].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Zapin Dance emphasizes togetherness couched in a dynamic harmony. This emphasis is described as a house with one giant supporting pillar and two doorleaves. The dancers are expected to have strong mind like that house, keep forward and never give up, but still make time for building true friendship.

As already explained in data description section, the paradigmatic aspect of Arabian Zapin Dance is heroism. In the age of companions of Prophet Muhammad, Zapin Dance was performed for arousing spiritual energy before waging the war and expressing the joy after winning the battle. But, the dance is mainly about the gratitude. Several years later after this age, Gujarat merchants used Zapin Dance in their preaching activity on every trade port they visited. Meanwhile, paradigmatic aspect of Malay Zapin Dance is an acculturation. Local culture is not professed as it was but there is a creative modification applied on several features. The purpose of this modification is to create more variants of Zapin Dance and to make it multifunctional. Speaking of Nusantara, Zapin Dance is intended more to be what so called *tajuk ajar* (an educative instrument). Symbolical interpretation of *tajuk ajar* is shown by a horizontal axis that binds paradigmatic aspect to syntagmatic aspect. In other words, the journey of Malay people to look for their cultural identity is still continuing, while establishing its sustainability. In this context, Malay Zapin Dance is always identified with Islam [14].

Paradigmatic aspect of Zapin Dance contains several components, namely moves, costumes, formation and function. All these components are arranged in such a way to produce a construction of relationship not only between Allah and Human (*hablum minallah*) but also between Human and Human (*hablum minannas*). Main priority of this arrangement is to strengthen the faith and to foster *akhlakul karimah* [15]. Therefore, it is not surprising if Arabian descents who reside at Arab villages consistently guard the authenticity of Zapin Dance. On the other hand, the development of Malay Zapin Dance is involving what so called “indigenization” in which the conserver absorbs elements of local (Malay) culture to be incorporated into the original dance and allows the dance to be presented as an ethnical expression. As the consequence, there are many variants of Zapin Dance such as *Jipin*, *Jippeng*, *Jepin*, *Jepen*, *Bedana*, *Dana*, or *Dana-Dani*. Each variant is unique. Paradigmatic aspect of Malay Zapin Dance has made Malay people to consider Zapin Dance as their ethnical entity. This consideration convinces Malay people to correlate the dance with their local culture or mother culture in a process called “cultural indigenization”. This process was found to be successful in giving a power to the dance. Syntagmatic aspect of Malay Zapin Dance resides in the fascination of new

functions which helps the dance to survive through its cultural bonding with Malay ethnicity. By taking this into consideration, a structure is then constructed as following:

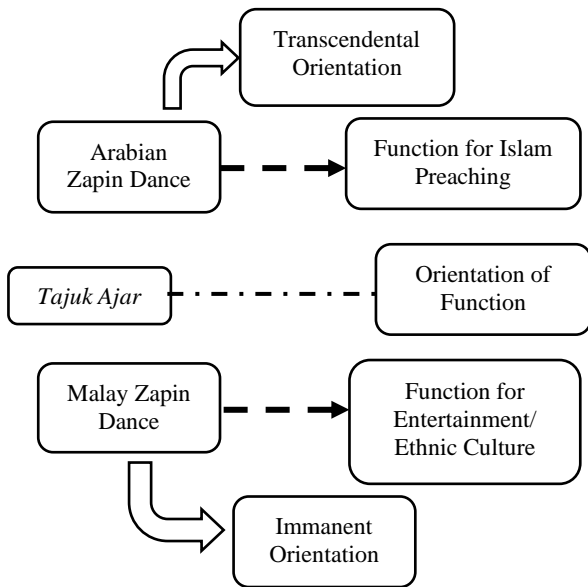


Figure 1 A Construction Scheme of Zapin Dance in Cultural Space of Malay People.

As shown in Figure 1, *Tajuk Ajar* is connected to Orientation of Function through an axis line. Above the line is Arabian Zapin Dance, which is used as an instrument to preach Islam. Arabian descents still maintain this position until now. Below the line is Malay Zapin Dance, which is oriented toward entertainment and ethnical identity. This separation truly differentiates transcendental (divine) orientation of Arabian Zapin Dance from immanent (social) of Malay Zapin Dance. Although both dances are different, they are complementary. It seems that both dances are not troubled with *Tajuk Ajar* axis line that separates them.

Zapin Dance has affected social space of Malay people positively in two ways: (1) the dance is used for preaching Islam, especially for strengthening *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, mentality and morality of the Moslems; and (2) the dance enables Malay people to establish social space with strong identity, which is, Islam. Therefore, the growth of Malay people in Nusantara is always related with Islam. Zapin Dance allows them to create their social construction.

4.1. Social Meaning

If paradigmatical concept of *Tajuk Ajar* on Zapin Dance is to be understood, it seems that Zapin Dance is fundamentally emphasizing togetherness. This emphasis remains strong in both Arab and Malay versions of Zapin Dance. In this context, togetherness is conceived as an effort to build social bond. This bond is described like a strong pillar that supports a house. Besides dance, there is a symbolical dish called *sirih pinang* (betel leaf)

to be conceived as a way to produce mutual respect and kinship. During the presentation of the dance, people usually sit with their legs crossed and eat betel leaf. Such habit is closely related with the livelihood of coastal communities that requires them to build relationship through amenity and develop kinship to support their trade on coastal commodities.

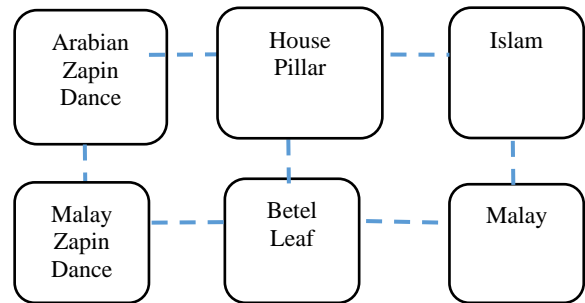


Figure 2 Relations in Binary Opposition that Construct Islamic Malay.

Structural analysis with Levi Strauss model has produced unique binary opposition scheme between Arab and Malay versions of Zapin Dance. Social condition of this scheme is occupied by “house pillar” and “betel leaf”. Both elements strongly affects the construction of new arrangement comprising of Islam and Malay cultures. Therefore, it can be said that binary opposition in Levi Strauss model is a construction of cultural space that influences the social manner of Malay people.

4.2. Spiritual Meaning

Arabian descents’ posture to conserve Zapin Dance amid the change of the ages is possibly affected by the dance itself. The moves in Zapin Dance contain heroic expression because it involves enthusiasm and persistence to kick the feet forward in a harmony with the peer. This expression has successfully built a strong spirituality among the conservers of the dance. Moreover, the agility to produce such moves together with the peer is not only an expression of spirituality but also an expectation toward true friendship. Indeed, spirituality and friendship are two social identities that grow in every community that conserves Zapin Dance .

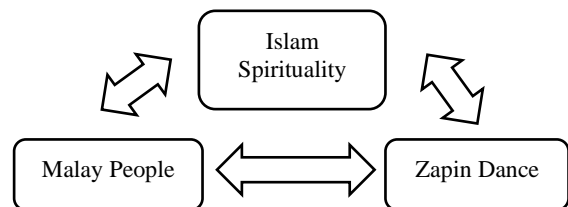


Figure 3 Triangle of Construction of Malay People Identity.

Triangle scheme shown in Figure 3 is a product of modification over culinary triangle theory proposed by Levi Strauss [16]. In this scheme, correlation analysis is

conducted to understand the role of spirituality in social construction of Malay people. Islam is considered by Malay people as a symbol of pillar that supports morality, or in other words, it helps the faith of Moslems upstanding. There is a popular quote in Malay saying that religious people are people with culture. Therefore, to be regarded as professing Islam, Moslems must absorb Malay elements into their social manner. Zapin Dance, which is previously related with Islam, must enter the realm of interrelation between Islam spirituality and Malay aesthetics. As the consequence, the end product is that Malay characteristics become the distinctive marker of Zapin Dance practiced by Malay people.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Malay people correlate the meaning of symbolical space in Zapin Dance with a phenomenon of "Tajuk Ajar". This phenomenon is a paradigmatical axis that allows Malay people to embody their ethnical identity. Transcendental (divine) orientation characterizes Arabian Zapin Dance and imparts spiritual meaning to this dance. The originality of Arab version of Zapin Dance is still conserved by Arabian descents. Immanent (social) orientation has given social meaning to Malay Zapin Dance. It helps Malay people to develop their ethnical identity in a sustainable way in Nusantara. This orientation is proved to be successful in mediating two countries with similar ethnicity, which is, Indonesia (Nusantara) and Malaysia (Malacca). It corresponds with a Malay proverb saying that Malay is Islam and Islam is the religion of Malay people.

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