



AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN THE ZAPIN MELAYU DELI DANCE IN MEDAN

Fachri Syauqii, Salman Al-Farisi

State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

fachrisyauqii770@gmail.com

Abstract

Zapin Melayu Deli Dance is one of the cultural heritages that is rich in aesthetic and religious values. As part of the Malay tradition in Medan City, this dance not only functions as entertainment, but also as a medium that reflects the spiritual and moral values of society. This study aims to explore and analyze aesthetic elements, such as movement, music, and costumes, as well as religious values reflected in the symbolism and philosophy of the dance. The method used is qualitative descriptive with an ethnographic approach, through direct observation, interviews with artists, and literature studies. The results of the study show that Zapin Melayu Deli Dance integrates harmonious art elements with Islamic teachings, such as simplicity, order, and respect for divine values. Thus, Zapin Dance is not only a local cultural identity but also an effective means of preaching. This study is expected to enrich the understanding of the relationship between art and spirituality in the Malay tradition. This study uses the theory of cultural acculturation, namely between Islamic culture and Malay Deli. Then, the data obtained from Malay cultural experts aims to explore the meaning and Islamic values in the Zapin dance.

Keywords: Aesthetic value; Religious value; Zapin dance; Medan.

Abstrak

Tari Zapin Melayu Deli merupakan salah satu warisan budaya yang kaya akan nilai estetika dan religius. Sebagai bagian dari tradisi Melayu di Kota Medan, tarian ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai hiburan, tetapi juga sebagai medium yang merefleksikan nilai-nilai spiritual dan moral masyarakat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan menganalisis unsur-unsur estetika, seperti gerakan, musik, dan kostum, serta nilai-nilai religius yang tercermin dalam simbolisme dan filosofi tarian. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan etnografis, melalui observasi langsung, wawancara dengan pelaku seni, dan studi literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Tari Zapin Melayu Deli mengintegrasikan elemen-elemen seni yang harmonis dengan ajaran Islam, seperti kesederhanaan, ketertiban, dan penghormatan terhadap nilai-nilai ilahiah. Dengan demikian, Tari Zapin tidak hanya menjadi identitas budaya lokal tetapi juga sarana dakwah yang efektif. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memperkaya pemahaman tentang hubungan antara seni dan spiritualitas dalam tradisi Melayu. Dalam penelitian ini menggunakan teori akulturasi budaya yaitu antara budaya Islam dengan Melayu Deli. Kemudian, data yang didapatkan dari ahli kebudayaan Melayu bertujuan untuk menggali makna dan nilai keislaman dalam tari zapin.

Kata Kunci: Nilai estetika; Nilai religius; Tari zapin; Medan.

INTRODUCTION

In its development, the Malay community has embraced Islam as both a teaching and a foundation of life. Consequently, the motto "customs are based on Islamic law, and Islamic law is based on the Quran" has been upheld firmly by the Malay society. With the deep-rooted



influence of this principle, Malay culture has increasingly aligned itself with Islamic teachings, departing from its earlier Hindu-Buddhist characteristics. One of the most significant influences in the realm of religion is the Arab-Islamic impact. This influence has been so profound that it seemingly erased Hindu and Buddhist elements, which now serve merely as ornamental aspects within Malay culture ¹.

The Islamization carried out by traders, both Arab and Indian, established the Quran and Hadith as the foundation of law in the life of the Malay community. The expression of Islam can be observed in every aspect of Malay society to this day. Islamic identity is deeply ingrained in the identity of every Malay individual. Some Malay historians argue that Islamic teachings have served as the cornerstone of Malay civilization from ancient to modern times. However, others contend that the behavioral shift among the Malays was influenced by the Arabs, who played a central role in the process of spreading Islam in the Malay region ².

The Malay community profoundly expresses its culture, one notable example being its traditional dance. Malay dance, as a coastal cultural heritage, has assimilated into the community's identity and is evident in the movements characterized by distinct traits and qualities. The emotional communication conveyed through dance possesses a natural power in fostering human interaction and relationships. Dance does not rely on complex forms of delivery; its essence lies in its spiritual value ³. Therefore, the author assumes that the rapid acceptance of Islam by the Malay community was due to Arab missionaries utilizing cultural mediums as tools for propagating Islam.

There are various methods of spreading Islam that have been conceptualized by several scholars. First, accommodative Islam facilitates interaction, which remains observable to this day. Second, the interaction between Islam and local traditions has been a compelling subject of discussion among scholars, such as Geertz with his concept of syncretic Islam, Woodward with acculturative Islam, Nur Syam with collaborative Islam, and Ricklefs with synthetic Islam. In Java, research findings indicate that the acceptance of Islam was more persuasive, with local culture tending to attribute status to Islam, resulting in a singular typology of religious practice. Other scholars, including Wekke, Subagya, Syakur, Hamidi, and Wibisono, highlight that Islam penetrated local societies through persuasive approaches that incorporated local cultural elements ⁴.

This article examines the history and development of *tari zapin* and *tari sarah hadralmaut*, which have become integral to the performing arts of the Malay community. Both dances exhibit Arab influences; however, *tari zapin* continues to be preserved today, while *tari sarah hadralmaut* has received less attention among the Malay community in North Sumatra, particularly in Medan. According to Sinar, there are four fundamental aspects of Malay dance: first, *tandak*, which involves foot movements including various steps and leaps; second, *igal*, which focuses on

¹ Koentjaraningrat, *Masyarakat Melayu Dan Budaya Melayu Dalam Perubahan*, ed. Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra (Yogyakarta: Adicita Karya Nusa, 2007).

² Anisatul Mardiah, "Akulturasi Budaya Melayu dalam Terjemah Al Quran (Studi Signifikansi Bahasa Al-Quran Terjemahan Terhadap Pemahaman Islam Di Sumatera Selatan)," *Jurnal Ilmu Agama: Mengkaji Doktrin, Pemikiran, Dan Fenomena Agama* 19, no. 2 (January 1970): 211–21, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jia.v19i2.2915>.

³ Koentjaraningrat, *Masyarakat Melayu Dan Budaya Melayu Dalam Perubahan*.

⁴ Haljuliza P Fasari, "Akulturasi Dalam Tradisi Kelahiran Orang Melayu Palembang," *Medina-Te : Jurnal Studi Islam* 15, no. 2 (2019): 247–65.

body and hand movements; third, *liuk*, which refers to bowing and swaying movements; and fourth, *lenggang*, characterized by walking while gracefully moving the body ⁵.

Several previous studies have explored similar topics: first, Chanifudin's research titled "*The Meaning and Cultural Values of Malay Culture: A Case Study on Zapin Dance*" ⁶, which found that the artistic elements of *tari zapin* not only serve as entertainment but also function as a collective memory for the Malay community, particularly in Medan, to preserve culture, the environment, and nature. The second study by Riza Tari Utari, titled "*Characteristics of Malay Dance in the Malay Community of Medan*" ⁷, revealed that Malay dances in Medan possess distinctive characteristics that differ from Malay dances in other regions, particularly in terms of choreography, costumes, and accompanying music. Nonetheless, the underlying meanings of Malay dance remain consistent. A third study by Norliza Mohd Isa, titled "*Symbolic Geometry in Islamic Art*" ⁸, highlighted the Islamic significance embedded in various forms of Malay art, especially in dance.

Based on the above, this study elaborates on differences compared to previous research. This article focuses on the aesthetic and religious values embedded in *tari zapin Melayu*, utilizing a historical framework to trace its origins.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs the theoretical framework of acculturation, which is a subset of cultural change. According to Mulyana, acculturation is an authoritative definition widely used by scholars, referring to a form of cultural change caused by contact between cultural groups, emphasizing the acceptance of new patterns and cultures by indigenous groups and minority communities. Meanwhile, Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits define acculturation as "the phenomena that result when groups of individuals with different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" ⁹.

Cultural modifications arise from contact or interactions that occur intermittently, as exemplified by the activities of missionaries and traders. In some cases, they are considered agents of cultural dissemination. The challenge lies in distinguishing acculturation from diffusion. Herskovits provides a theoretical basis to differentiate the two: diffusion refers to the spread of culture that has already occurred (to be achieved cultural transmission), while acculturation refers to the process of cultural dissemination (is cultural transmission in process)¹⁰.

Koentjaraningrat, citing Linton, outlines several processes involved in acculturation. He conceptualizes a distinction between the core elements of a culture (covert culture) and its

⁵ Fachri Syauqii, "Tari Serampang Dua Belas: Sejarah Dan Eksistensinya Hingga Kini," *Local History & Heritage* 1, no. 1 (June 2021): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.57251/lhh.v1i1.19>.

⁶ Chanifudin Chanifudin, "Makna Dan Nilai Budaya Melayu Studi Kasus Pada Tari Zapin Melayu," *Jurnal Tamaddun* 11, no. 1 (August 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24235/TAMADDUN.V11I1.13081>.

⁷ Riza Tari Utari, "Karakteristik Tari Melayu Pada Masyarakat Melayu Di Kota Medan," *Gesture: Jurnal Seni Tari* 2, no. 2 (2013): 94–105, <https://doi.org/10.24114/SENITARI.V2I2.1441>.

⁸ Robby Hidajat et al., "PROSIDING Seminar Antar Bangsa Indonesia-Malaysia 'Konstruksi Ruang Kreatif, Simbolik, Spiritual Seni Pertunjukan Dalam Masyarakat Melayu' Penerbit Singgasana Budaya Nusantara," in *PROSIDING Seminar Antar Bangsa Indonesia-Malaysia*, ed. Pujiyanto (Malang: Penerbit Singgasana Budaya Nusantara, 2021).

⁹ H. Khomsahrial Romli, "Akulturasi Dan Asimilasi Dalam Konteks Interaksi Antar Etnik," *Ijtimaiyya* 8, no. 1 (2015): 1–13.

¹⁰ Hari Poerwanto, *Kebudayaan Dan Lingkungan: Dalam Perspektif Antropologi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2010).

outward manifestations (overt culture). The core elements include: (1) systems of cultural values, (2) religious beliefs, (3) certain customs learned early in the socialization process of individuals within a community, and (4) customs with functions that are broadly integrated within the society. On the other hand, the outward manifestations of culture include physical culture, such as tools and useful objects, as well as knowledge, procedures, lifestyles, and recreational practices that provide utility and comfort. However, the core elements of culture (covert culture) are relatively slow to change and are resistant to being replaced by foreign elements ¹¹.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The History of Zapin Melayu Deli Dance in Medan

The Zapin dance is a traditional Malay dance that has persisted and been preserved in the coastal regions of North Sumatra. This dance played a significant role in the spread of Islam, serving as a tool or medium for propagating Islamic teachings in North Sumatra. The dance represents Arab culture that has undergone acculturation with Malay culture. The term zapin originates from the Arabic word *zaffan*, meaning "dancer," and another term *alzapin*, meaning "foot movement." Initially, the Zapin dance was a form of entertainment within the royal courts along the Strait of Malacca, particularly in the Siak and Indragiri Kingdoms. It was often performed during ceremonial events, such as welcoming distinguished guests.

Originally, the Zapin dance was performed exclusively by men. However, over time, and due to its dynamic evolution, it is now performed by both men and women as a means of expression and social interaction. The Zapin dance features unique movements, including synchronized hand and foot movements that align with the accompanying music and lyrics. The movements consist of an eight-count footwork sequence, divided into two parts: four counts for stepping and four counts for turning. The dance is accompanied by various musical instruments, such as the *marawis*, violin, and vocals delivering praises (*sholawat rasul*) ¹².

Historians suggest that the Zapin dance was introduced by Arab traders from Hadhramaut in the early 16th century, entering through Johor Lingga. It subsequently became an integral part of social activities tied to Islamic spiritual understanding. According to Soewondo, the Arab version of the Zapin dance, known as zapin Arab, was exclusively performed by men. This aligns with the explanation of Ahmad Muzani, an Arab Zapin artist from Gresik, who noted that the dance emphasizes communal harmony, often performed in pairs and with rhythmic movements.

The dissemination of Zapin dance among the Malay community has incorporated creative modifications influenced by the social dynamics and tastes of the local population. This evolution has made the Zapin dance more dynamic and flexible, with a stronger emphasis on entertainment. The choreography often involves paired male and female dancers. There are two main variations of the Zapin dance: the zapin Arab and the zapin Melayu in the Malay Archipelago, each adapting to its respective context. The zapin Arab, which developed in Arab communities, served as a medium for spreading Islamic teachings and fostering faith and social cohesion among groups ¹³.

¹¹ Koentjaraningrat, *Sejarah Teori Antropologi II* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1990).

¹² Abdul Gani Jamora Nasution et al., "Peran Tari Zapin Dalam Dakwah Islam Di Sumatera Utara," *JURNAL SOSIAL HUMANIORA DAN PENDIDIKAN* 2, no. 3 (2022): 127–37.

¹³ Robby Hidajat et al., "Tafsir Tari Zapin Arab Dan Melayu Dalam Masyarakat Melayu," *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)* 4, no. 2 (2021): 1266–73.

According to Mubin Shepard, Malay dances in North Sumatra, such as Zapin, Rodat, and Hadrah, were introduced by Arab traders. Initially, the Zapin dance gained prominence in the Siak Kingdom, where it rapidly developed. Some sources suggest that Zapin music and dance were initially used as entertainment for students after religious studies. However, the Zapin dance underwent acculturation with local culture during the marriage of Tengku Embung Badariah binti Sultan Abdul Jalil Alamudin Syah (1766–1780 CE) to Syarif Utsman bin Syarif Abdul Rahman Syahabudin, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. The development of Zapin began among the Malay community of Bengkalis, under the rule of Siak Sri Indrapura. Zapin was first introduced in Bengkalis around the 1940s by Abdullah Noer, an artist from Deli in Medan. The Zapin dance remained a familiar tradition even during the social revolution of 1946, which led to the destruction of Malay Sultanate palaces in North Sumatra, including Deli, Serdang, and Langkat ¹⁴.

Over time, the Zapin dance transitioned from merely a form of entertainment and expression of joy to a medium for propagating Islam. Besides its role as a medium of proselytization, the Zapin dance also functioned as a trade strategy for Yemeni merchants to attract customers. In the era of globalization, the Zapin dance has undergone significant transformation. The zapin Arab is now primarily performed as entertainment during events. In Medan, the Zapin dance is often seen at weddings. A specific variation of the dance in Medan, known as zapin pecah tiga, was developed by Tuanku Panglima Gandar Wahid, the fifth Sultan of Deli, in the 18th century ¹⁵.

The zapin pecah tiga is performed during the malam bainai ceremony, where inai leaves are ceremonially applied to the bride before her wedding. Before the zapin pecah tiga, other dances, such as the inai dance and hadhramaut dance, are performed. The zapin pecah tiga begins with a salutation to the bride, host, and audience, symbolizing the refined character of the Malay people. This dance is performed at weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and other traditional events, often by economically well-off communities ¹⁶.

Islamic Values in the Zapin Melayu Deli Dance in Medan

Malay dances prioritize important aspects such as ethics, etiquette, behavioral patterns, and outward human attitudes, including ways of dressing, sitting, or living patterns in line with Islamic teachings. The adherence to Islamic ethics in Malay dances has led to the creation of high aesthetic values. The extrinsic value of Malay dances lies in the delicacy and softness of their movements. The Zapin Melayu dance also embodies the philosophy of simplicity. Its movements include footwork, body posture, and the swaying of hands and arms. The footwork is modest, covering only the breadth of the dancer's feet and not wider than the calf, with minimal lifting of the feet to avoid drawing attention to the soles. This simplicity produces a sense of beauty and grace in the steps and movements ¹⁷.

Islamic values in the Zapin dance are reflected through specific movements, such as *gerak alif sembah* and *gerak alif melongkah*. These movements symbolize steadfastness, patience, and

¹⁴ Indah Yuni Pangestu, Ediwar, and Martion, "Estetika Tari Zapin Sebagai Sumber Penciptaan Karya Kaki-Kaki," *Bercadik: Jurnal Pengkajian Dan Penciptaan Seni* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.

¹⁵ Sarita, Isjoni, and Kamaruddin, "Sejarah Perkembangan Tari Zapin Tari Zapin Desa Meskom Kecamatan Bengkalis Kabupaten Bengkalis," *Jurnal Online Mahasiswa (JOM) Bidang Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan* 2, no. 2 (2015): 1–10.

¹⁶ Syf. Meyfira Nazlia Fuaddah, "Kajian Sejarah Tari Zapin Arab Di Kota Pontianak," *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran Khatulistiwa* 9, no. 2 (2020): 1–10.

¹⁷ Suci Rahmadani, "Pertunjukan Tari Zapin Pecah Tiga Dalam Upacara Malam Bainai Pada Masyarakat Melayu Deli Sumatera Utara," *Laga-Laga* 1, no. 1 (2017): 44–53.

resilience in facing life's challenges. They also carry religious meanings, emphasizing the importance of perseverance and faith in overcoming life's problems¹⁸. *Gerak alif sembah* signifies that everything good should begin with blessings and guidance from the Almighty. Additionally, the *gerak catu merpati* conveys the importance of caring for and protecting the surrounding environment, as well as avoiding actions that harm it. Circular movements in the dance represent the orbiting of planets around the sun, symbolizing the omnipotence of Allah Swt.

The worship-related values embedded in the Zapin dance, as identified by Robiah, include:

1. Gerakan *gelombang pasang*; teaching the importance of doing good deeds.
2. Gerak *melongkah*; imparting the value of patience and perseverance in life.
3. Gerakan pecah delapan; highlighting the need to pursue life's endeavors in multiple directions, accompanied by both effort and prayer.
4. Gerakan *fathin*: emphasizing the importance of seeking lawful sustenance with caution.
5. Gerak *catuk burung merpati*: encouraging hard work and striving to earn a living, as reflected in the Quran, Surah Al-Jumu'ah (62:10).
6. *Bungo depan*: Advocating for balance between good and bad deeds.

CONCLUSION

The aesthetic and religious values embedded in the movements of the Zapin Melayu Deli dance in Medan align with Islamic teachings. Although often performed as entertainment during wedding ceremonies, the dance embodies a blend of Islamic and Malay cultural elements. This reflects the core principle upheld by the Malay community: *adat bersendi syara', syara' bersendi Kitabullah* (custom is founded upon Islamic law, and Islamic law is founded upon the Quran). This principle ensures that every aspect of Malay culture, particularly that of Melayu Deli in Medan, is infused with Islamic values.

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¹⁸ Wan Muhammad Afiq Wan Muhamad Fauzan and Sharifah Kartini Said Husain, "Geometri Dalam Tarian Zapin," *Asian Journal of Environment, History and Heritage* 2, no. 2 (2018): 331–42.

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