THE SPIRITUAL ESSENCE OF *TAWHID* (ONENESS-PEERLESSNESS) IN ZAPIN DANCE PERFORMANCE BY THE BEHOLDERS OF THE *TARIQAT NAQSABANDIAH* IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

Tariqat Naqsabandiyah is one of Southeast Asia's leading Tariqat or 'ways' of the shari'at. The word shari'at literally means "the road to the watering place," symbolizing the broad way which mankind must travel in order to find God. A Sufi practice, the Tariqat Naqsabandiyah (from the Naqshabandis of Central Asia) utilizes dhikr (remembrance of the divine names or verses of the Qur'an), often accompanied by physical movement to achieve an ecstatic state. It plays an important role in sustaining Malay-Islamic traditional performance practices as a form of mute dhikr, essential in seeking the realm of the altered other. This paper discusses zapin as a form of Malay-Islamic traditional music and dance and as mute dhikr in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Sufism, dhikr, tauhid, zapin, and Naqsabandiyah

Introduction

Islam is the most widely practiced religion in Southeast Asia with an approximation of more than 240 million believers covering forty percent of the region's population. Majority Muslims are found in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei while a significant minority on Mainland Southeast. Most Muslims in Southeast Asia belong to the Sunni sect of the Shafi'i school of *fiqh* or jurisprudence.[1]

The coming of Islam and the processes of Islamization in Southeast Asia were believed to have occurred theoretically through two channels. One was through trade and the other was through Sufi missionaries. While Muslim traders brought inter-oceanic trade from West Asia and India to Southeast Asia, the Sufi missionaries played a significant role in spreading the faith by syncretizing Islamic ideas with existing local beliefs and religious notions. This has made Islam in Southeast Asia to be multi-faceted and multi layered. Different interpretations of the faith resulted in a variety of groups.

The ruling classes, which embraced Islam, further aided the spread of the religion throughout the region. The royal palace not only retained traditions and practices of the past pertaining to the sustenance of royal regalia and symbolism of kingship, it became the center of excellence for indigenous literature and religious

teachings. The palace *literati* or royal keepers were instrumental in disseminating religious teachings, which include Sufism through the teaching of *tariqah* or way of the *sharia't*. The word sharia't literally means "the road to watering place" implying true knowledge. In the broadest sense, Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. In general Sufis have looked upon themselves as Muslims who take seriously god's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self. As such, they tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of soul over social interaction.[2]

Sufism in Southeast Asia

Sufis have played an important role in the Islamization of the Malay world in Southeast Asia through the teaching of Tasawuf or Sufistic traditions through Sufi organizations or communities. Sufism in Southeast Asia have produced rich literature from Sufi orders by well known Sufi literary figures such as Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, Muhammad ibn Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, Hamzah Fansuri, Syams ad-Din as-Sumatrani, Nur ad-Din ar-Raniri, Syaikh Yusuf al-Khalwati, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim as-Samman al-Madani, and 'Abd as-Samad al-Palimbani.[3] Sufi orders or *tariqah* (way of the *Shariat*), which is the Arabic word for "path' or "way" are used for both the social organization and the special devotional exercises that are the basis of the order's ritual and structure.[4] *Tariqah* or Sufi orders in Southeast Asia gained ground through the tariqah or Tariqat Qadirriyah, Syattariah, Kalwatiyyah Sammaniyyah and Kalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah.

One of the most widespread Sufi orders in Southeast Asia is Naqshabandiyah, which originated from Bukhara in Central Asia, in the late fourteenth century but spread to contiguous areas of the Muslim world within a hundred years. However, Naqshabandiyah came to Southeast Asia by way of the Malay pilgrims and students from Mecca and Medina in Hijaz, through the teachings of Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi (d. 1827), whose initiated descendents were known as Khalidi of the Khalidiyyah Sufi order. Disciples of Khalidiyyah in Southeast Asia were able to secure permanent implantation of the Naqshabandiyah order or *tariqat* through their influence within the Malay royal courts or as Sufi ulama (religious leaders) or through their literary dispensation. One such disciple was Ismail Minangkabawi from Sumatra. After spending a long period of time in Mecca, Ismail Minangkabawi returned to Southeast Asia to settle in the island of Penyengat, the seat of the Riau royal house. Upon gaining the allegiance of the royal court, Ismail Minangkabawi propagated Khalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah in the Riau Archipelago. Another such disciple, Syaikh Abdul Wahab Rokam (d. 1926) was dispatched from Mecca in 1886 to spread Khalidiyyah throughout Sumatra from Aceh to Palembang. He was able to successfully establish a religious community (Pasantren) in Langkat, Sumatra and was instrumental in the spread of Naqshabandiyah in the Malay Peninsula through his three-year sojourn in Johor. Regional characteristics of Naqshabandiyah in the Malay world were further endowed after Wahhabi conquest in Hejaz (Saudi Arabia) severed links to Sufi order in Mecca.

Hence, Naqshabandiyah's leading characteristics of strict adherence to the *shari'ah*, a sobriety in devotional practice that results in the shunning of music and dance, a preference for silent *dhikr*, and a frequent (although by no means consistent) tendency to political involvement became less dogmatic.[5] Silent or loud *dhikr* is considered important in Southeast Asia as an extension to the recitation of *doa* (ordinary supplication to ask for divine blessing in general). *Dhikr* (remembrance of God's name or reciting litanies) takes the form of methodical repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) or the names of God or of God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) or some formula such as "*Allah hayy*" (God is the Eternal one) with prescribed gestures, has become one of the fundamental rituals in Tariqat Naqshabandiyah. A gathering to perform the dhikr ritual usually takes place in private homes or in closed public spaces. Such gatherings could be convened with the presence of a culturally structured movement system and musical accompaniment although generally Naqshabandis would refrain from using dance and music.

Zapin

Being the oldest syncretized performance traditions in the region of the Straits of Malacca fusing Malay performative styles with dance and music of the Hadrahmaut Arabs,[6] the Malay *zapin* (which is now known by various other names such as *Jipin, Jepin, Japin, Zafin* and *Dana* in Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei and Singapore) had taken roots amongst the Malay-Islamic communities in the Straits of Malacca since the coming of the Hadrahmi-Arab traders to become one of the most widely spread Malay-Islamic folk dance traditions in insular Southeast Asia. Like many other Malay folk and social dance traditions, *zapin* owed its existence to the processes of intercultural and cross-cultural borrowings through the ages. The peninsular Malays and Sumatra East Coast Malays had adapted new ideas and foreign dance forms into their own cultural milieu creating new dance and musical forms, which became highly syncretized and indigenized. Borrowing and adapting Arabic music and musical instruments such as the *'ud* or locally known as *gambus* (lute), *tambur* (similar to the *darabukkah*) and the local *dok* (drums), and *marwas* (similar to the *bandir* or *bindir* single headed frame drum); the Malays re-created a new dance tradition through the fusion of Malay aesthetics and Arabic music. *Zapin* has not only become a dance form of the Malays on both sides of the Straits of Malacca, it has spread far and wide throughout the Malay Archipelago over the last millennium.

The inclusion of dance and music as a means of convening silent *dhikr* amongst Naqshabandis in Southeast Asia is exclusive to practitioners of Zapin. Nevertheless, not all Zapin performers are *dhikr* practitioners. Although *zapin* signifies an Arabic-Islamic as well as Malay-Islamic performance traditions, it does not implicitly signify that *zapin* is *dhikr*. Only practitioners of Naqshabandiyah within the regions of the Straits of Malacca beginning from Langkat, Deli and Serdang in North Sumatra to the Riau Archipelago including parts of the southern Malay Peninsula, which form areas covered by the Tasawuf or Sufistic footprints Tariqat Khalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah, used *zapin* for *dhikr*.

From its beginning in the thirteenth century, the re-invented tradition of *zapin* dance and music in the Straits of Malacca became signifiers of eclectic Malay-Islamic performances indigenous to the area. Shaped through the syncretic adaptations of the Hadhrami-Arab trader-settlers' performative dance and singing genre, the resultant performance tradition merges two different worlds, the patriarchic Arab-Islamic performative tradition and bilateral-Malay-Islamic influences. In spite of the existence of two different styles of *zapin* in the Straits of Malacca, an older variant known as *Zapin Arab* (Arab *Zapin*) and the generic Malay *Zapin* known as *Zapin Melayu*, the two worlds came together through the processes of engaging Islamic aesthetics while affirming Islamic world view and belief system in the Malay maritime communities of the Straits of Malacca. *Zapin Arab* is an exclusive dance tradition of the Arab decent groups while *Zapin Melayu* is performed by Malays in Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Sumatra, and in the Riau Archipelago. The Malay *zapin* is recognized by its regional specificities that are often based on its affiliation with former Malay rulers or Sultanates. In Sumatra, variants of Malay *zapin* are associated with the former Sultanate of Langkat, Deli and Serdang in North Sumatra; Sultanate of Pelalawan and Siak Sri Indrapura in present day Riau province; Sultanate of Jambi and the Sultanate of Palembang Sultanate of Johor-Riau-Lingga in Penyengat, Bintan; and the principalities of Karimun, Bengkalis, and Tembelan.[7] Today, *zapin* has become a highly respected dance tradition among the Malays, who consider it to be Arab-derived and Islamic, yet upholding Malay decency and propriety.[8]

Zapin Music and Dance

The syncreticities of *zapin* could be observed in all aspect of its performances. The melody of a *zapin* piece for example is sung by a vocalist or carried by the *'ud* or *gambus* (lute), the violin, the harmonium and/or the accordion. The *gambus* is derived from the Middle Eastern *'ud*, a pear-shaped chordophone with rounded wooden back and short fretless neck. It has five to eight strings in double courses and a single string that are plucked with fingers. The *harmonium* is an aerophone with free beating metal reeds and a keyboard, operated by a pair of bellows by hand. This instrument is borrowed from the musical instruments of India. *Marwas* are double-headed cylindrical shallow body hand drums with skins attached to the body by laces of rope that are tied tightly to tighten the skin as the players play percussive rhythmic patterns. The *dok* is single headed cone-shaped drum struck by fingers to punctuate certain beats of a given *marwas* rhythmic pattern, which heightens syncopated rhythmic patterns within the ensemble of the *marwas* drums.[9]

Zapin music, which usually accompanies the *zapin* dance is played in three different sections; the *taksim*,[10] a improvised solo played by a single *'ud* or *gambus* (lute) player; the melodic section with *kopak*, a loud rhythmic *marwas* drumming patterns in interlocking style; and wainab or *tahtim*, which forms the coda for a piece to end that utilizes an extension of the main melodic phrase and the loud *kopak* drumming pattern.[11] The divisional units or sections in the *zapin* music have become generic in areas along the Straits of Malacca.

The musical sections of *zapin* music correspond with the sections of the dance performance. All *zapin* performers are required to enter the dance area in a single file or in double rows and present a salutation to the musical prelude or *Taksim*,

played by a single *'ud* or *gambus* (lute) player. This is to be followed by the linear formation of *zapin* performers who dance facing one another while repeating dance motifs and tracing a recurring forward and backward floor plan, interrupted with a series of skips and squatting positions, which is known as the *kopak*. At the end of each performance the dancers perform jumping and squatting dance motifs to the accompaniment of relatively faster drumbeats in the form of the *wainab*.

Zapin dancers are required to master the basic units of dance consisting of eight beat dance steps, which are repeatedly performed throughout each dance. There is a slight difference in executing the dance steps. *Zapin* performers begin each eight beat phrase by remaining motionless on the first count before stepping the left foot on the second count and continuing with the right foot on the third count. This is alternately done with both feet for the rest of the eight beat phrases. Each of the dance steps and its accompanying arm and hand movements is the most basic unit of movements and void of any specific meanings. The smallest meaningful unit of *zapin*, however, emerges after the fourth count as a series of basic units are combined to become an eighth beat phrase forming dance motifs, which are recognized as *langkah* in Malay.

The time taken to learn each *langkah* or dance motif may vary between individuals because it also requires the ability to master the basic units of dance that built each *langkah*. Hence, a *zapin* dancer must be able to master the grammatical units of each dance chronologically. While the steps in each dance may only require coordinating leg movements, it is a different situation for the arm movement and hand gestures. This is where skills and dexterity become important.

Zapin and *Dhikr*

Divinity in Islam is associated and affirmed by the notion of *al tawhid*, which embodies the conception of the absolute transcendent Creator that is one and unique (*wahid*). The essence of the utter transcendence of God is the oneness and peerless-ness of god, which declares the transcendence of God to be part and parcel of Islamic philosophy, of life and of the believers' way of asserting that God has created all humans capable of knowing Him in His transcendence. Remembering God through *dhikr* by uttering God's name and methodical repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) stresses an inwardness of contemplating God's existence and his absolute trescendence, forms the corpus of *dhikr's* affirmatioon of *tawhid* in *zapin*. However, it remains an esoteric practice by Naqshabandis within the region of the Straits of Malacca and the Riau Archipelago convened as silent *dhikr*. The Malay *zapin* continues to portray ephemeral permeation of Islamic aesthetics and Malay artistic conventions through the passing of time. Malay-Islamic performative nuances are clearly observed in the Malay Zapin of the Straits of Malacca through the recognizable artistic manifestations that have absorbed and perpetuated the notion of *al Tawhid*. It is the essence of Islam that affirms Allah (SWT) to be the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master recognized in indigenous artistic manifestations based on the merging concepts of abstractions, stylizations and repetitions that is depersonalized through the abstractions (*mujarad*). It is derived from "one," "unique" (*wahid*) that is translated as in the unity of God,

oneness, peerlessness, and utter transcendence of God. Islam declares the transcendence of God to be part and parcel of Islamic philosophy, of life and of the believers' way of asserting that God has created all humans capable of knowing Him in His transcendence.[12]

Dancing the *zapin* or playing *zapin* music could become silent *dikhr* only if the practitioner wishes to embody the body movements or musical pulses as pulses of a silent *dhikr* utterance. It is done by performing *zapin* without distorting the conventions of body movements where the upper torso is kept almost rigidly upright with one arm behind the back or in front of the navel of the male dancer, allowing the other arm free to move. The basic dance phrase is marked by the absence of any movements at the first high timbre beat of the *marwas* drums. Dance movements may only begin on the second drum beat, which is of low timbre as it initiates the *kinemic* pulse. The movement begins with the left foot stepping right-forward-diagonal-middle, followed by the right foot stepping left-forward-diagonal-middle on the high timbre third drum beat and ends with the left foot repeating its earlier movement. This 4-beat pattern frames the basic dance unit. Several units of steps extends the basic dance unit with an additional 4-beat phrase of sequenced movements of the right and left foot initiating a clockwise turn on the right foot as the dancer turns to face his initial dance path. A Zapin dance motif begins by inverting the pulses from low and high timbres to the strong stresses on the even-numbered beats, as the dancer completes the 8-beat phrase. A repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* drums punctuated by a *dok* drum over a 16-beat colotomic2 unit frames the dance motifs to form a *choreme* in Kaeppler's terminology. The alternative low and high timbre stresses of the *marwas* and the *dok* establishes a pattern of weak-strong stresses with the strong stresses on the even-numbered beats. Thus, the *zapin* rhythmic 4-beats weak-strong stress patterns punctuated at mid-point and at the end of the 4-beat unit by the low resonant timbre of the *dok* drum mimics the colotomic unit of a gong ensemble. This temporal unit, repeated throughout a *zapin* performance, provides the cyclic repetition for a 4-beat basic dance unit or *morphokine*, an 8-beat dance *motif* and a 16-beat *choreme*.

The compound structure of *zapin* drumming patterns within a 16-beat colotomic unit and the over arching rendition of *zapin* songs consisting of repeated quatrains of passionate verses in praise of Prophet Muhammad and/or the attributes of God either literally or metaphorically, provides the spatial and sonic space for *dhikr*. Although dance movements only begin on the second drum beat, which is of low timbre as it initiates the *kinemic* pulse, dhikr is first uttered during the first high timbre beat of the *marwas* drums. The first shahadah, *La ilaha illal-Lah, Muhammadun rasulula-Lah* ("There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God") commences on the high timber beat while the dance begins on the low timbre beat, which forms the second drum beat. The entire *zhikr* would be completed at the end of the 8-beat phrase of repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* drums. By then, the dhikr-dancer completes his dance motif as he completes the first round of his *shahadah*. The dhikr would be repeated over the 8-beat phrase into a second round of *shahadah* recitation as the dancers complete his dance or *choreme* over 16-beats colotomic unit.

Within these chronological grammatical choreographic units, the *zapin* dancers interact with drummers and other *zapin* musicians with mnemonic vocalizations while sustaining the silent dhikr over improvised dance motifs. To

practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, most of the improvisations that deal with syncopated dance movements within a colotomic unit of *zapin* music provide both spatial and sonic space for the inward contemplation of God's oneness and peerlessness, the spiritual essence of *Tawhid*. To non practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, the dance improvisations within the colotomic unit of *zapin* music with mnemonic vocalizations are deliberately made to impress or challenge new dancers or to encourage others to join in the dance or as signals to the musicians to end their performance.

Hitherto, *zapin* signifies both secular and religious affiliations designated by the practitioners. The semantics of *zapin* are both secular and spiritual. As a performance for celebratory reasons in social events such as weddings, circumcisions, or events of communal significance, *zapin* becomes a secular event. However, *zapin* could be a form of mute *dhikr* (remembrance or reciting litanies) consisting of mental or verbal repetition of one of the divine names over the regular four beat counts of drumming pattern executed through repetitive steps of dance motifs often covertly practiced by Sufis in their *tariqat*. Performers and practitioners of *zapin* music and dance, either seculars or Sufis, perform *zapin* as a signifier of the salient feature of their maritime world through the stylized depiction of dance motifs and dance phrases. The semiotics of *zapin* are both worldly and Islamic.

Endnotes

[1] Mohd Anis Md Nor, "Playing is dancing: Permissibility and Legitimacy of Malay-Islamic structured movement system in the Malay world of Southeast Asia," *Proceedings 25th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on ethnochoreology*, (Kuala Lumpur: Cultural Centre University of Malaya and Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture of Malaysia, 2009), p. 165.

[2] William C Chittick, "Sufism: Sufi though and practice," in Esposito, John L. (editor) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 102.

[3] Yunus Rahim, *Posisi Tasauf dalam sistem kekuasaan di kesultanan Buton pada abad ke-19* (Jakarta: NKIS, 1995), pp. 5-7.

[4] John O. Voll, "Sufism: Sufi orders," in Esposito, John L. (editor) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol.4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 109

[5] Hamid Algar, "Naqshbandiyah," in Esposito, John L. (editor) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol.4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 226.

[6] Hadrahmaut, which is today located in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, is made up of a valley complex in the middle of southern Arabia and is separated from the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula by a mountain range. The location of Hadrahmaut on the great trade route from South-East Asia to the Mediterranean coast has, since Roman times, also contributed to the out-migration of the Hadhramis to South-East Asia. See Mohd Anis Md Nor, *Zapin: folk dance of the Malay world,* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4.

[7] Mohd Anis Md Nor (editor) "*Zapin Melayu di Nusantara"* (Johor Bahru: Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2000), pp. 17 – 61, 249-291.

[8] Mohd Anis Md Nor, *Zapin: folk dance of the Malay world.*

[9] Mohd Anis Md Nor "The Relationship of Traditional Malaysian Dance Movements to the Colotomic Units of Music," paper read at the 37th ICTM World Conference in Fuzhou and Quanzhou, China, January 4-11, 2004, pp. 128-130.

[10] Taksim is derived from the Arabic word "taqsim," which means "division" or "distribution" and refers to a special improvisational musical form that is guided by the Makam system, a system of melody types, which provides a set of rules for composition.

[11] Mohd Anis Md Nor, "The Relationship of Traditional Malaysian Dance Movements to the Colotomic Units of Music," pp. 128-130.

[12] Mohd Anis Md Nor, "Iconographic Perspectives of Islamic Culture and Their Dances," paper read at the *Dance Iconography Sub-Study Group Meeting of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology*. Bamberg, Germany, March 27-30, 2003.