

TRANSFORMED IN TRANSFERENCE: The *TARI INAI* of Kelantan

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Introduction

One of the great challenges in teaching dance that primarily has an oral tradition is dealing with its changes within new contexts and frameworks. This paper intends to describe transformations in the process of learning, documenting and teaching traditional dance repertoire specifically from the perspective of gender, using the example of the *Tari Inai* (or Dance of Henna), a traditional folk form. I have chosen *Tari Inai* as the case study since it addresses generic issues in the process and reveals unique challenges within the Malaysian environment, highlighting the impact of gender in the process of transference and propagation.

The dance has been practiced for many years (it is claimed to date back to the 18th century but no exact dates are available) in a town called Pasir Mas in the northeastern state of Kelantan. Since 1990 however, this is the only state in Malaysia that has been ruled by the fundamentalist Islamic party PAS that bans gaming, alcohol and other activities that are deemed un-Islamic. This brand of Islamic understanding includes the ban on performing arts and female artists that has had a direct impact on theatre, music, dancing and teaching dance, and specifically the role of female students, scholars and performers.

This paper will use the experience of Zamzuriah Zahari, a female graduate of dance from the National Arts Academy¹ of 2003, and currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in Drama at the University of Malaya. The essay will also draw from the experience of the reciprocal visits by these masters for workshops and performances at the National Academy since late 2006. Zamzuriah is now considered a young master of this traditional dance form and has been given the task of teaching it to a new generation of dancers 500 kilometers away from its original geographical location and in a different social and political climate.

In this process of transference, this gendered dance form has undergone significant transformation. Early writing describes the dance as always being performed by male dancers, during celebrations of circumcision, or other important festivities in village life such as engagements, marriage ceremonies, and perhaps as part of prayer offerings for healing and special intentions. The dance is filled with nuances, subtleties and has

¹ Founded in 1994 by the then Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism. Renamed National Academy of Culture, Arts and Heritage with the acronym ASWARA under the new Ministry established in 2006. Fully funded by the Government of Malaysia and run according to the ACT 653 approved in Parliament under the Laws of Malaysia now under the Ministry of National Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage, Malaysia.

improvised sections in response to the audiences' reactions with no fixed floor pattern, highlighting the strength and dexterity of the performer.

In the original situation, the performance was a reflection of gender perception, and made a loud statement regarding the sexual role and identity of the man in the fabric of Kelantanese society. Judith Hanna (1988: 82) notes that "moral strength is acquired through perseverance, concentration and self-confidence in dance training." The man is responsible for evangelization of religion. The 'new' form, while still highlighting strength and presence, has clearly altered the 'spirit' and structure, and is far removed from its original intention. It has undeniably undergone a gender shift.

The Research Process – The First Transference

Certain challenges in the process of documentation will be addressed first in this paper before moving onto the issue of gender and its representation within this dance form. Initial research on this dance was published in the book *Tarian Melayu*² by Professor Dr. Mohd. Ghouse Nasruddin. He describes it as combining movements from *silat*³, *makyung*⁴ and *sendo*⁵ that is slow and controlled. He goes on to provide a detailed written analysis of the structure and applies terminology from the classical Indian dance *mudras*⁶, although the implied semiotics are not the same in this performance context. This, accompanied with photographic evidence albeit slightly out of focus, is the primary mode of documentation used in this book.

There are other devices for dance notation such as Labanotation employed by Prof. Dr. Mohd. Anis Md. Nor in his research of the *Zapin* and *Randai* forms, or Benesh Notation and more recently, the use of video and film technology. Although scholars and notators may disagree, transposition into written form using signs and symbols is extremely difficult and cumbersome, especially when the research subject is traditional Asian dance. Many Asian forms have extremely intricate hand gestures and corresponding eye movements.

In addition, traditional dance forms possess a profound and unique relationship between dance, dancer and music. It is an incredibly tedious task to accurately transcribe movement into these symbols or words and sentences that will make the dances come alive, evoking moods or feelings or *rasa*.

To illustrate this, here is an excerpt:

"Hanya pada ketika ini sahaja tangan kiri mula digerakkan dari gerak asas tarian inai: ia digerakkan ke atas tangan kanan, dan diletakkan meyilang badan ke bahu kanan.

² Published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1994

³ Traditional Malay martial art form.

⁴ Traditional dance theatre incorporating music, text, movement also spelt Mak Yong, Ma'yong.

⁵ According to Prof. Dr. Ghouse this refers to acrobatics, or acts encompassing a variety of martial arts.

⁶ Hand gestures that convey and have specific representational meaning.

Dengan tangan dalam posisi ini, penari melayah ke belakang sambil memusingkan tangan kanan mengikut arah pusingan jam ke hadapan, ke kanan, dan ke atas muka.”
(Mohd. Ghouse, 1994:175)

Translated:

“It is only at this point when the left hand is moved from the basic movement of the Dance of Henna: it is moved above the right hand, and placed across the body towards the right shoulder. With the arm in this position, the dancer leans back while turning the hand clockwise to the front, to the right and in front of the face.”

The above is a good written description of the dance by the author who is a respected scholar and performer. Scholars and those possessing the necessary language skills, interpretive ability and dance knowledge will be able to translate the above description into a movement phrase. However, to further make the argument, take the direction ‘the dancer leans back’ from the above paragraph. Here, there is no indication of *how* much the dancer leans back or from which pivotal point in the body the lean begins.

There is an ambiguity about the origin of the lean – neck, upper back, or waist and so on. The description does not indicate whether the desired effect is that the posture remains erect with a straight back during the lean, or if there could be allowances for a natural curve which could be a result of hunching from factors of age and physical limitations. There is no indication again, regarding the lean to the side, specifically if both sides of the body are lifted and lengthened, or if one side of the body stretches while the opposing side is crunched.

Dance researchers should ideally have the mental and technical facility to study that particular dance genre. In the case of the *Tari Inai*, there are specific physical prerequisites to successfully learn this dance. The first and most apparent is an extremely supple spine in the lumbar vertebrae area, strong abdominal and back muscles to allow for a back arch until the head touches the floor to gather the currency notes with the mouth called the *liuk ambil duit*, and then to recover to the starting upright position. Coordination is also required as the dancer moves across the performance area in this arched position.

This acrobatic skill evokes a crustacean-like quality that may be compared to a circus act (hence the earlier reference to *sendo*). Another physical challenge, but to a lesser degree, is the *selo ghe ular*, the initial salutation position or *sembah*. This is a cross-legged position but with a variation where the right leg is placed over the left leg in a tight position with the knees touching (without causing the right knee to be lifted high) and keeping the ischium bones of the pelvic girdle on the floor. It has similarities to a yoga position. The *selo ghe ular* requires suppleness and flexibility in the hip joint and affects the aesthetics of the dance.

The above two examples are of clear physical attributes that must be possessed by the dancer researcher in order to duplicate the source satisfactorily. These significant physical challenges implies greater accessibility for the ‘trained dancer’ and generally

perhaps more suited to female bodies that are usually more pliable and flexible. However, the physical aspect is merely one dimension of the dance and perhaps the more difficult aspect when learning a traditional dance form is the 'spirit' or *roh* of the dance. This is the inscrutable quality that some traditional dance possesses, especially from the court traditions or the ritual tradition.

This mesmerizing quality translates into the ability of the performer to transcend space and time, and to draw the audience into the realm of the dance and into the liminal state of the performer. This can be attributed to the ownership of the form and space, the release of energy within the body, a presence and the complete confidence in the art that is never and should not be misconstrued as arrogance. However, other opinions attribute it to sheer talent! This *roh* cannot be taught. It requires immersion into the culture and traditions of the practicing community to go beyond replication of dance form and to then take ownership.

In 2002, Zamzuriah Zahari elected to undertake a month-long project and conduct an ethnographic study of this traditional dance as practiced in the Bechah Tendong Village near Pasir Mas where residents are ethnic Malays and Muslim, and generally related to one another.

While fully aware of the cultural constructs of the state, referred to in the introduction, it was felt that as a native of the region, she stood a greater chance of overcoming the challenges of gender prejudice. It was hoped that she would be more easily accepted and embraced by the practitioners who are usually wary of 'outsiders' or non-native researchers and certainly very skeptical of women.

A parallel may be drawn on perceptions of the female dancing body to Jane Freeman Moulin's (1989:3) notes regarding Tahitian Dance and Music that "drumming is quite simply not acceptable female behaviour." Further, the initial enquiry process revealed an extremely communal system of performance art that was territorial, protectionist and suspicious. The *guru sishya*⁷ system of training was deeply ingrained into the conscious and subconscious minds of the locals.

This meant that the teacher was all important and the 'school' was sacrosanct. Moving from one to another was tantamount to desertion or betrayal and often caused irreversible damage to relationships. Thus it was important to be introduced to the right people, the truly good performers, teachers and acknowledged masters.

Art is subjective that the interpretation of 'good' raises another host of questions. Many acknowledged 'masters' are proclaimed such due to awards and citations primarily received from the government. An interesting comparison would be the career trajectories of two *dalangs* or puppet masters of Kelantan who have both passed on, Hamzah Awang Amat and Dollah *Baju Merah* (Dollah Red Shirt). One went on to become the nationally and internationally celebrated master, with greater wealth and

⁷ Also referred to as the gurukul or gurukulam system of training, where the student is a disciple who lives with and serves the teacher.

stature while the other continued to live hand to mouth remaining unbowed to any hegemonic persuasion. Hamzah Awang Amat received the National Laureate Award, bestowed upon him by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in 1994 and the Fukuoka Culture Prize in 2000, with prize money in the tens of thousands.

Dollah *Baju Merah* received the Lifetime Achievement Award posthumously in 2005 at the Cameronian Arts Awards, initiated by independent artists and organizations, which brought his family RM 5,000! While their artistry, experience and contribution was phenomenal and worthy of accolades, the paths of these two great men were divergent largely to the influence and decisions of political leadership and their individual responses to these situations.

Within its cultural and original performance context, *Tari Inai* epitomizes male-ness. It is a dance in which the most distinctive characteristic is that the male dancer literally 'bends over backwards to collect money with his mouth', the *liuk ambil duit*. This can philosophically be interpreted as the physical embodiment of the role of the male in society.

The sex role is perfectly scripted in this performance. The male role of the bread winner, the provider and the protector in the family and community is potently crystallized in the dance. This evokes a powerful message and image of the man, how he wishes to portray himself and how he wishes to be perceived in the gaze of the audience. Thus the crux of the complicated situation of proposed research is that it was to be conducted by a female.

There were a few vital reasons that allowed for this experience to take place and for permission to be subsequently given:

1. There were very few young men of the village including the male heirs of the dance masters, that were interested to carry on the tradition of learning and performing this dance. The owners of this dance were rightly worried about its continuity and propagation;
2. Zamzuriah was a student at a formal institution of study in the capital city, and therefore it was assumed that she would not be participating in public performances in the state of Kelantan thus assuaging the initial fears of public outcry and displeasure with the desecration of the art or incurring the wrath of religious leaders;
3. It is probable that the position and prestige of the performer was at a low in the state⁸. Having a young researcher interested in learning the dance gave prominence and respect to the village practitioner thus sending a message that there were people beyond the village gates who valued the art;
4. It was a novelty that an attractive young, virginal female would be in their presence in a 'permissible' or *mukrim* situation over an extended period of time.

It was also through the personal connections of Zamzuriah's parents who attended all initial meetings and the intervention of the late Pak Saari Abdullah, a regional

⁸ Performers generally receive approximately RM 10-30 for each presentation.

practitioner of the traditional theatre form of *Makyung* and the brother-in-law of the National Laureate for Performing Arts 1999, the late Khatijah Awang that she was finally permitted to study the dance with Zukri Hussin who was selected to be her teacher. He was a student and the nephew of Che Hassan, a master of this dance form.

Che Hassan was at that time 63 years old and ailing, and not physically able to teach but served as a committed observer, informant and advisor. He has since passed on. Zamzuriah would become the first female to be allowed to perform the graduation ceremony or *sembah guru*. Here a separate problem arose and that Zukri himself had yet to perform the *sembah guru*, and was a young man of 38.

Close proximity between teacher and student of opposite sexes was and still is, regarded with suspicion. Zamzuriah was not immediately allowed to learn the dance but by patiently watching initial practices, armed with a video camera and a tape recorder, proving her intention and her virtuousness (and not virtuosity), the lessons began and the teacher slowly introduced the dance to her.

This was always in the presence of Zukri's wife, other villagers and curious on-lookers. Another challenge became evident and that was to her dismay, Zamzuriah discovered that the pedagogy was unclear and unlike the process that she had become accustomed to at a formal learning institution. In hindsight, this was attributed to three possible factors:

1. The teacher himself had not studied it analytically and had possibly not paid adequate attention to details of posture, gesture and musicality;
2. The general pedagogy of transference of knowledge of dance or movement forms such as martial arts, was greatly lacking; and
3. A possible feeling of not wanting to give everything away thereby affecting their 'rice bowl' or *periuk nasi* (a common Malay language saying that implies a threat to their livelihood or opportunities to make a living).

Understanding that research is reflexive in nature, there are other challenges in the process of interviewing that impacts outcome, which may or may not be peculiar to the Malaysian context. Zamzuriah had to ask questions to clarify certain ambiguities regarding dance history, movement content and performance context.

Questions can sometimes be misconstrued as a challenge to authority or one's expertise and most village dance masters are unused to the probing questions of young researchers. It is also common that many village dance masters in Malaysia are illiterate and find the research process intimidating. Many too, find that being thrust into the limelight or spotlight of questioning, extremely uncomfortable.

In other case studies involving traditional dance, the answers to questions were sometimes given with the intention (or subconscious intention) to allot greater value to particular aspects of their personal, religious, social or cultural spheres. Occasionally, a few interviews had revealed that greater knowledge was presumed with respect to the history and origins of the dance. There was little or no supporting documentation

submitted as proof implying there was possibly more fiction than fact! Another interesting personal insight or academic speculation is that often the traditional teachers would agree to obviously different suggestions, styles or movement interpretations to avoid confrontation or perhaps even to save time and energy! It is possible that in their psyche, perceived differences in dance presentations are unimportant.

A plausible explanation for this apparent lack of attention to details is that many dances are improvisatory, and thus these variations on a theme are acceptable and even add to the aesthetics of the art. This could be linked to a rural village Muslim philosophy of not being judgmental and instead, allowing individual freedom of expression.

Generally, villagers do not believe in rote learning, and it is ironic that it is these remote villages that individual ability and personal interpretation is celebrated more profoundly than in hallowed halls of tertiary institutions or experimental theatres in urban capital cities.

In gathering information, this female researcher was extremely cautious not to offend in any way. In fact, Zamzuriah went out of her way to bestow honour and show respect to the older teachers. With each visit, she brought the teachers simple gifts of cloth and food, always stating that it was from her parents, as a token of gratitude for looking after the welfare of their daughter. Gifts directly from her would be deemed inappropriate and much too forward for a young Muslim lady. Her care and concern, her respectfulness and social etiquette were above reproach. She wore the head scarf or *tudung* to cover her head and hair and she was the epitome of Muslim female-ness.

In this situation, her femininity became an advantage as she endeared herself to the village elders. In the process of transference of knowledge, there was little feeling of being threatened in any manner since the male role is established and reinforced as the stronger, more knowledgeable and capable. The politics of gender role-playing within the context of dance research is evident in this case study. Man as the teacher gave him power over the woman as the student thus maintaining a *status quo* expounded by the laws of Kelantanese society, although within the household, it is a matriarchal society.

In a manner of speaking the power struggle between the male and female did not become an issue as it was clear that the female body was subservient to the instructions of the man. The woman would only be able to do inasmuch as she was taught or asked to do, and she could never do anymore. Thus there was no shift in the gendering of the dance per se at this point in the process of transition.

The Next Transference

Since 2004, Zamzuriah has been teaching this dance at the National Academy, as part of the compulsory traditional dance syllabus. It has also been performed extensively at

*Tapestry*⁹, *MyDance Festival 2005*¹⁰ and at every possible opportunity due to its uniqueness, with the intention to raise awareness of this form. The dance truly tests and challenges the dexterity of the dancer. This move is also seen as an important method of ensuring continuity and propagation of a dying art form. Today, it is taught in a dance studio, with mirrors and air-conditioning, to both male and female dancers simultaneously. The entire aspect of segregation between sexes has been completely obliterated.

The students are of mixed race and varied religious backgrounds and this does not impinge or interfere with the process of learning, teaching or performing. Within this context, close proximity is a non-issue and the sexual barriers between the performers and between teachers and students, have been broken. A primary component of the learning outcome is that it will ultimately be presented as a group performance tailored for special needs of the teacher or performance producer. As such, the performance now has to possess specific arrangements of floor patterns and the music has to be edited, if not performed live, according to these requirements.

The dance now also does not allow nor has very little room for improvisation during performance. Precision is the desired effect with up to 30 dancers dancing in unison. Both male and female performers perform exactly the same movements and wear the same costumes. This process of translation necessitates that all dancers be trained to listen, count the music bars, to phrase and to respond in exactly the same way, for example, with accents on the *gendang*¹¹, *gong*¹², and swaying to the melody of the *serunai*¹³.

Understanding the Transformation

Another observation regarding the dance in its new context can be illustrated using the example of the arm movement *susun mengkadang*, where the palms of the hands join together with the fingers facing towards the body. The female dancers seem to place stronger accents on this and other arm movements than their male counterparts. This almost seems to be a psychological reaction in the female performer to accentuate and further reinforce the display of physical or muscular strength which appears to be taken for granted in a male body.

The male dancing body in a male-gendered performance art organically accepts, acquires or inhabits the position of male strength or *kekuatan*, and energy or *roh*, while the female dancing body subconsciously or otherwise, has a tendency to exaggerate it,

⁹ Annual traditional dance showcase featuring an extensive repertoire of classical, social, folk and ritual-inspired dances from Malaysian ethnic groups staged by the Dance Department, ASWARA.

¹⁰ Held at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre and organized by the Malaysian Chapter of the World Dance Alliance or WDA.

¹¹ Goat-skinned drum played on two faces.

¹² A metal or bronzed knobbed instrument that hangs from a stand that when struck usually indicates the end of a musical phrase.

¹³ A quadruple reed woodwind instrument.

to indicate and accentuate its presence. This is primarily because the female body is seen as to not possess that physical strength through the gendered gaze of the audience or even perhaps a female teacher.

It should be noted here that the interpretation of the *roh* of the movements should not be confused, is distinct and different from *tandava* or *lasya*, the male and female style and energy in classical Indian dance forms that requires and displays separate movement textures.

In the reconstruction of *Tari Inai*, as initiated by the Faculty of Dance of ASWARA, the original symbolism of strength or 'male-ness' is lost and has been transformed to represent a different kind of strength. The urban gaze of an equal opportunity tertiary arts institution based in Kuala Lumpur, sees the strength, *kekuatan* and *roh* of the dance as the embodiment and the unification of both male and female energy and form. This has thus transformed the dancer to a neutered gender being – the sex of the performer has become immaterial and unimportant.

In its transition from village folk art to current performance practice, it has evolved into a symbolic representation of the merging of the male and female *roh* that claims equal status between the sexes. This is so far removed from its original performance context highlighting a clear and marked shift in the philosophy of the performance. The male female gender contestation in its original context in Kampung Bechah Tedong in Kelantan has ceased to exist.

In its independence from the village folk art to its current practice, *Tari Inai* has claimed its new identity. The *Tari Inai* has decidedly become a very contemporary presentation of a traditional form that blurs the lines differentiating the gender-roles in performance as a reflection of the blurred lines of gender-roles in contemporary urban society.
