Analysis of Lundayeh Dance Music in Relation to Its Dance Aesthetics

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A B S T R A C T

Background: This paper examines Lundayeh traditional dances that are currently preserved in Kemabong, Sabah. Lundayeh is one of the minority ethnic groups that have settled in the land of Sabah for more than 100 years. The communities distribute mainly along the south-west coast of Sabah. Objective: The research looks into the musical aspects of the dances, especially in the musical structures, characteristics, functions and meanings. How music connects to the dancers as well as the dance aesthetics and philosophies is one of the main concentrations in this paper. In addition, the paper will also look into whether the dance and music play the roles as an expression of the collective cultural mentality of Lundayeh besides as the reflection of Lundayeh artistic aesthetics. Results: The music is found to have served as accompanying instruments that support and enhance the dance movements and expressions, aesthetical values and functions. Conclusion: Both music and dance are inseparable and equally important in conserving the cultural aesthetics and values of Lundayeh.

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INTRODUCTION

Lundayehs are one of the Borneo’s oldest tribe with their original homes in the central highlands near the Krian River that is now part of Kalimantan, Indonesia. In Sabah, the Lundayehs are also known as Lundayo. In Sarawak, they are known as Lun Bawang. Dances and music have been indispensable cultural arts serving the communities of Lundayeh since about 100 years of their existence in Sabah.

Crossing the high beautiful hills and magnificent mountains along the southwest coast of Sabah for more than 3 hours or 163 kilometers in distance from Kota Kinabalu, we finally reached Tenom, the prominent town in distance from Kota Kinabalu. Kemabong was our actual destination, where Lundayeh villages can be found. There are three major Lundayeh villages in Kemabong: Kampung Kalibatang Baru, Kampung Baru Jumpa and Kampung Sugiang Baru. Kampung Baru Jumpa consists of four small villages: Kampung Jumps Ulu, Kampung Jumps Tengah, Kampung Jumps Seberang and Kampung Belumbung. There are other smaller Lundayeh villages nearby such as Kampung Meluyan Lulu [12].

Gong And Sekafi Dances:

According to Encik Langub Padan and Encik Udan Kafong, the ancient dances that are still remembered by the elder Lundayeh in Kemabong from their ancient traditions are gong, sekafi, busak bakok and monyet dances. Monyet dance no longer exists in Kemabong, whereas busak bakok dance is rarely performed nowadays in Kemabong as it is only known by the older Lundayeh villagers. Most of the dances now are newly created dance forms by the young dance teachers based on the traditional dance styles. There are currently more than fifteen dance forms been newly developed by the younger generations. Most of the old villagers and dance teachers, such as Langub Padan, do not quite regard those contemporary dances as their genuine traditional dances. However, this matter is taken casually by Lundayeh as a natural change in life.

The only Lundayeh traditional dances that are still surviving and being preserved in Kemabong are gong and sekafi dances. These two dances are originated from Kalimantan and they are currently practiced mainly in Kampung Baru Jumpa, Kampung Kalibatang Baru and Kampung Sugiang Baru. Gong dance is the genuine and original Lundayeh dance, whereas sekafi dance is adopted from another Lundayeh Dayak subgroup, Dayak Kenya and Dayak Iban, in Kalimantan [14].

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Gong dance can be performed by a combination of male and female dancers, as well as either male or female dancers alone. The female dancers dance with gentle and delicate hands and feet movements reflecting the feminine natures of Lundayeh women. On the other hand, the male dancing postures and movements are warrior-like to incorporate “silat” martial art forms and ancient hunting and fighting movements in the jungles and wars. In this paper, only gong dance of the combination of female and male dancers will be studied as it provides both dance features of female and male dancers.

Traditional sekafi dance can be divided into three types, as far as Lundayeh in Kemabong can remember: sekafi tangan (hand movements), sekafi lilin (candle movements) and sekafi parang (sword movements). In Kemabong, only sekafi tangan (today, combining with dancing on gongs) and sekafi parang are practiced in Kampung Sugiang Baru, Kampung Kalibatang Baru and Kampung Baru Jumpa [16]. All the three types of sekafi dances have the similar female and male dance movements and gestures as the gong dance - balancing turns, silat steps, controlled thigh and wrist twists, soft and gentle hand movements. The only difference lies on melodies and improvisational styles of sekafi music performed in the three different types of sekafi dances [9]. This study focuses specifically on a highly valued sekafi tangan dance with combination of dancing on gongs in which only female dancers are found. Nowadays it is often simply known as sekafi dance among Lundayeh people in Kemabong.

The traditional dances, along with the accompanying music, relate the Lundayeh ancient life philosophy and knowledge to their people through the aesthetical meanings of the dances. Lundayeh traditional dances are usually performed at celebrations, festivals and social occasions, especially Annual Lundayeh Cultural Festivals in Sipitang in the month of June. All Lundayeh from Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Indonesia will participate and celebrate this significant festival with the aim to unite and tighten the ties among their people from around the different countries, as well as to preserve their identity and root, with the hope that all Lundayebs from everywhere would live together helping, caring and supporting each other in the spirits and concepts of true brotherhood [3].
Musical Instruments:

Gong dance is accompanied by gongs (Figure 3) known as tawak among Lundayeh. There are three to four gongs accompanying the gong dance. Gongs can also be replaced by one to two talab buluh (Figure 4) when gongs are not available although it sounds softer and more serene compared to gongs. Talab buluh is plucked producing the same syncopated interlocking rhythms and melodies like the gongs. In this paper, only the gong music in gong dance will be studied because it is quite rare to find talab buluh accompanying the gong dance in Kemabong nowadays since not many Lundayeh youngsters know how to play the music instrument [10].

The gongs are made of bronze or brass and thick with broad rim. Gong is believed to have originated from Brunei where gongs had been traded in from China and Jawa during the Kingdom of Majepahit in the 15th century. Each gong has its own pitch ranging from low to high depending on the size and thickness of the gong. Three gongs are tuned by ears in three or four different tones and they vary from one village and gong maker to another. A beater made of wood and wrapped with rubber is used as a beater to beat the gongs.
Sekafi dance is accompanied by one to two sekafis (three-stringed chordophone). Sekafi is made from wood and common metal strings (Figure 5). There might have been some inter-influences between sape of Iban, Sarawak, and sekafi of Lundayeh in the old days as they both look quite alike.

Sekafi is tuned in pentatonic and it plays highly improvised melancholy and gentle melodic lines on the lowest string, and harmonized chords and tones by strumming together the other two upper strings. In this study, pentatonic scales of “F, G, A, C, D” was found in the tuning of a particular sekafi musical instrument recorded in the field research. The pentatonic tuning varies from one instrument and one village to another as it relies on the instrument maker and the traditional tuning preference of the village itself.

Traditionally, sekafi and gong musicians learn the playing techniques, musical pieces and improvisations from the elder musicians or from hearing musical performances in the villages. The techniques and skills of sekafi, similar as gongs, are transmitted through oral learning and teaching process, direct observation and instruction, without any written notations or pre-set compositions. Therefore, both gong and sekafi musicians have to memorize and learn to improvise the music as they practice and perform along with their teachers or other experienced musicians.

**Dance Music In Relation To Its Dance Aesthetics:**

**Gong Dance:**

The main function of gong dance is to heighten the spirits and unity of the villagers. According to Lundayeh villagers in Kemabong, the energetic and strong beating sounds of gongs resonate giganticallly through the air of the villages and able to spread the feelings of encouragement and high-spirits in the hearts of their people. Their villagers are thus able to maintain good and strong conditions, as well as to recover from illness and weak spirits, tiredness, social problems and community breakdown [8]. The role of music in strengthening the spirits of villages is very much needed and may help their people to maintain cohesiveness and energy for continuance of hard life in the villages.

The most significant features of gong dance music are the interlocking rhythms and melodies, cycles of accentuated impulses, great resonating tones and energetic driving movements. All the gong players are equally important and respected in providing each of their interlocking beats and tones in order to complete the whole piece of gong music for the dance.

When starting the gong music, the higher pitched gong initiates the first beat, followed by the middle pitched gong, and the gaps between the first and second gongs are filled by the lowest pitched gong in faster accentuated rhythmic patterns.

Gong players produce small degrees of variation and improvisation in the interlocking rhythmic patterns of the music. The structures of gong music are found much simpler, not as flowery and complicated as the Murut or Kadazandusun’s gong playing. However, the rhythms and melodies interwoven tightly with each other in enchanting deep tones and free flow reflect the free nature, unity, interdependent and intimate relationships among the Lundayeh people. At the same time, strong resonating and energetic driving force of the gongs bear the specific purpose to enlighten and raise the spirits of the entire village. Here, the interlocking musical patterns and intimately joint melodic tones of all the gongs result from the musical philosophy of Lundayeh that places great importance on team spirits and unity, opposing to the ideology of individualism practiced in most modern dance and music.

In gong dance, combining both female and male dancers, the massive volume of dancers, makes the dance look resplendent, more beautiful, spirited and enchanting. According to Udon Kafong [8], the experienced dance teacher, the dance is regarded as beautiful when it shows the spirits of strength and unity of their people, as well as the great feminine beauty and masculine bravery of Lundayeh. Moreover, the aesthetical values help to educate and remind their people the importance of inner virtues, team spirits and unity in achieving a long-lasting and prosperous community. Therefore, both females and males are choreographed to dance together in large numbers to present the visual and sensual images and meanings. In achieving these dance aesthetic values, the magnificent, driving and interlocking beats of the gongs support to provide the feelings of greatness and interdependently united strength to the dancers and audience. The accentuated impulse and driving force of the beats, together with vast resonating and intertwined tones of gongs, relate the intended messages to the dancers (as the dancers are taught to follow and sense the gong beats very closely with subtlety) and draw the dancers to develop and present the ideology of inner greatness and unity of Lundayeh in their dance movements and aesthetical expressions. Thus, each female and male dancer must connect with the gong music to emanate the desired ambience through coherent dance patterns and expressions.

The aesthetical meanings of strength, unity and great natures from both genders of equal importance are presented through the dance choreographs. The gongs are definitely the most suitable musical instruments to magnify the significance of the dance and put forth the essential functions and meanings of the dance. Therefore, the gong music is utilized to guide the dancers to achieve the aesthetical values of gong dance and to heighten the inner spirits and strength of the unity of the villagers.
Sekafi Dance:

Sekafi dance chosen in this study, as explained earlier, emphasizes the aesthetical beauty of females. In sekafi (tangan) dance, the female dancers are required to dance on gongs (gong derives from the word of “agong” or “great”) which represent the “greatness” (“keagongan”) of inner values of Lundayeh females. The dance signifies the great inner natures of Lundayeh females that are essential in supporting their communities, educating their future generations as mothers and assisting the males in the families and at work as wives [15].

The inner values of Lundayeh females include sacrifice, compassionate love, gentleness, patience, wisdom etc. These values are regarded essential for their communities advancing towards harmony and prosperity. According to Rebika Yamat, the dance teacher, sekafi female dancers intend to carry the aesthetic concept of female “greatness” and to disseminate the aesthetical meanings to the audience through the dance. Those women who cultivate the inner “greatness” of females will be qualified to marry and become wives for Lundayeh males [8].

In sekafi dancing, a female dancer is considered achieving the dance aesthetics if her dance movements are subtle, soft, dignified, tolerant and controlled, mirroring the traditional feminine natures of Lundayeh. In this case, sekafi is used to evoke the emotions and feelings of sekafi dancers with its delicate, gentle and moving melodies. Furthermore, sekafi musical styles are composed primarily to speak the feminine natures designated in the dance aesthetics. The highly improvised melodic ornaments and rich melodic lines indirectly reflect the nourished and rich physical and inner beauty of Lundayeh females [14].

Hence, to successfully present the dance aesthetics of sekafi dance, sekafi music is designed and utilized to play the essential supportive role in the dance.

Conclusions:

From the analysis of the dance music related to its dance aesthetics in Lundayeh gong and sekafi dances, it may conclude that both gong and sekafi dance music are composed and designed, sprung primarily from the aesthetic values and philosophies of the dances (See Figure 6).

Gong music is structured in interlocking rhythms and melodies, with driving accentuated energy in order to achieve the aesthetic meanings and functions of the dance. To Lundayeh societies, gong dance serves to heighten the spirits and unity of the villagers. At the same time, the dance should also present the good natures of Lundayeh males and females that are essential in cultivating a strong and good community. Through the dance, Lundayeh communities nourish strength, unity and good natures among their people.

Sekafi music reflects a lot of gentleness and enchanting beauty of the females. As sekafi dance functions to relate the feminine greatness, thus sekafi music obviously serves as a tool to trigger and guide the female dancers in developing desired dance aesthetics, as well as to further support and enhance the aesthetics of the dance. Both sekafi music and dance strongly lead Lundayeh women towards the expressions, cultivation and preservation of great qualities and values of females. This is one of the ways Lundayeh people value, honor and pay respect to their females, who are equally important as their males in contributing harmony, happiness and prosperity to their societies.

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Fig. 6: Relationships between Lundayeh Dance Musical Characteristics and its Dance Aesthetics and Philosophies.

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Books & Articles:

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