Performing Arts in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Edited by Madoka FUKUOKA

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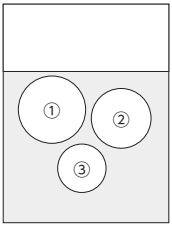

①····· Didik Nini Thowok performing *Bedhaya Hagoromo* in IDF 2024
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②····· Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA dancers perform *Drops & Seeds*, a collaboration with Ensemble KNM - Berlin, at the Department of Performing Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
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③····· Rehearsal scene of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA
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Global Collaborative Research (GCR)
Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University
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Kyoto, 606-8501 Japan

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Performing Arts in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Madoka FUKUOKA

The Purpose of the Study

This working paper is the research result of our collaborative study project titled as "Consideration on Practices of Contemporary Arts in Southeast Asia: Preliminary Research Focusing on Performing Art Forms"(representative: Fukuoka Madoka). The project is one of the themes adopted for the 2023 GCR (Global Collaborative Research) program organized by CSEAS (Center for Southeast Asian Studies), Kyoto University.

The purpose of the study is to examine the current state of contemporary art practices in Southeast Asia. Research questions behind this purpose are: (1) What is Southeast Asia like as a cultural region? (2) What are the characteristics of Southeast Asian culture in the contemporary world? (3) What is the contemporary era for Southeast Asian artists?

Although we will mainly focus on the performing art forms such as dance, theater, and performance art, the study emphasizes a comprehensive approach to art. The comprehensive approach had been emphasized in the studies on visual art forms in Southeast Asia, as well as the importance of performance art. In the catalogue of the Southeast Asian Contemporary Art exhibition held in 2017, Kataoka described "the openness of contemporary art in Southeast Asia, which cannot be contained within the framework of museum exhibitions" (Kataoka 2017: 287). As elements of the openness, she mentioned two points; one is the importance of performance art, and one more is the significant presence of art collectives (Kataoka 2017: 287). While mentioning the activities of a Japanese performance artist Shimoda

Seiji, she explained two reasons why performance art has a great influence in the region. One is that "it (performance) is an intangible form of art that can be instantaneously presented and immediately stopped, in societies subject to cultural censorship" and another is that "performance art can be presented directly to the general population using a single body, even in regions where systems and institutions for exhibiting art have yet to be developed" (Kataoka 2017: 287). She also pointed out that "In reality, classifying artistic expression in terms of contemporary art, performance, or the performing arts is nothing more than a matter of expedience, and artists who traverse and straddle domains in this way are not uncommon in Southeast Asia"(Kataoka 2017: 287).

The points mentioned above are suggestive to our perspectives for the research. In addition to the examination of previous research results, the current situation of art practice we experienced in Southeast Asia where people are active without being bound by distinctions in art genres also suggests to us the necessity of a more comprehensive approach. In this study, we would like to consider artistic practice as something that crosses the boundaries of genres. We would also like to consider artistic practice in a holistic perspective in diverse contexts including historical, cultural, political, and social contexts.

The title "Considerations on Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia" may lead one to assume two things: "Considerations on Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia" and "Considerations on Art in Contemporary Southeast Asia." The study considers both of them. It will focus on the art practices including "traditional art forms" not only "contemporary art forms." Rather than focusing only on the practice of so called "contemporary art," we would like to examine the relationship between the traditional art forms or traditional senses of value that support the art practice, and the practice of contemporary art forms. Also, we emphasize the consideration of the relationship between "contemporary" and "the past" or "tradition" in the

dimension of the human body.

Southeast Asia as a Cultural Region

Southeast Asia is the vast area of the southeastern region of Asia, consisting of regions in south China, east of the Indian subcontinent, and northwest of Australia. It is divided into two regions: mainland and maritime. Using the current names of the countries, the mainland includes Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, while the maritime consists of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, and East Timor which became independent in 2002. Diversity is the prominent characteristic of the region, along both the biological and cultural dimensions.

The sphere of the area of Southeast Asia has been defined in many ways throughout history. The beginning of the official categorization of Southeast Asia as one region during World War II was a strategic definition aimed at controlling this region from the outsider's viewpoint. In the latter half of the 1990s, ASEAN, which started as five countries, became an alliance of ten countries[1)]. ASEAN is an economic development-oriented association that brings together countries from politically diverse backgrounds. This situation largely came about as a result of a union between countries oriented toward socialism and those more deeply predicated on liberalism to aim for economic development. On the other hand, the areas of these countries are extremely diverse in terms of both cultural and natural environments, making it difficult to find any unified characteristics. It is difficult to find cultural unity in Southeast Asia, a region that has been historically shaped by various intentions. Southeast Asian artists also point out this situation through their artistic practices.

1) Ten states of Southeast Asia are members of ASEAN, while East Timor has been positioned as an observer state until today.

A contemporary artist in Singapore, Ho Tzu Nyen pointed out the diversity of Southeast Asia. In the catalogue of his exhibition titled "A for Agent," we can see the following description.

> The term "Southeast Asia" has become commonly known since the Allied forces used the term during World War II for operational purposes. The regional coherency implied by this term is however in congruent with the multiplicity of cultures, religions, languages, and political system prevalent in the area (Ho 2024: 33 Catalogue of "A for Agent").

Based on this concept, Ho Tzu Nyen is engaging his original art work of an online platform titled "CDOSEA"(Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia 2017-ongoing). It is the umbrella project asking "What constitutes the unity of Southeast Asia, a region that has never been unified by language, religion, or political structure?" (Ho 2024: 33 Catalogue of "A for Agent")

In the cultural dimension, Southeast Asia has been a region of cultural diversity whose original cultures were constructed by the inclusion of various cultural elements and acculturation.

The region was influenced by cultures from many areas, such as China, India, West Asia and Arab lands, and from the West. As Ho stated and indicated in his exhibition, it is difficult to see cultural integration in Southeast Asia because of this diversity. Multiplicity and the mixture of ethnic groups, languages, and religions have been prominent characteristics of the area.

As for the historical dimension, colonialism has influenced almost all the regions in Southeast Asia. Encounters with various foreign cultures, as well as the indigenous cultures of the former colonies have impacted the construction of culture in the region.

The former colonial territories or boundaries had great effects in Southeast Asia as administrative regions. Independence from colonial rule and modernization have been important elements in the construction of integrated states in Southeast Asia. Despite the differences in the degree and direction of national construction seen inside the area, cultural elements were positioned as important factors in the process in each region. Besides visual cultural elements such as historical sites, religious architectures, and ethnic costumes, the various performing art forms were positioned as one of the important cultural items in the process[2)].

The Era of Contemporary for Southeast Asian Artists

Southeast Asian artists are addressing the various issues they face today and asking themselves what they can achieve through art practice. In the midst of advancing globalization, their art practices are being disseminated to the world.

A prominent phenomenon in globalization is the formation of a uniform standard of cultural expression because of the development of media, the rapid flow of things and information, economic development, and the educational system. On the other hand, there are tensions between these global standards, and traditional moral values, historical or local viewpoints, etc. The disseminated standards have promoted the artistic activities of Southeast Asian artists in the global art scene, as well as affecting changes in indigenous art expression. The important point is in that situation, people face these multiple senses of value and standards and search for originality in their cultural expression.

In the study of contemporary theater in Southeast Asia, Tan and Rajendran considered the contemporary in /and Southeast Asian

2) In the introduction of the book on Ramayana Theater in Southeast Asia, Fukuoka positioned the epic poem as one of the platform where people search the cultural integration in contemporary Southeast Asia (Fukuoka 2023: 11-17).

performance (Tan M.C.C. and C. Rajendran 2020: 9-20). While mentioning three contributors' articles, they pointed out that "theater and performance in Southeast Asia today is inevitably tied to the past, to history and to tradition, their aesthetic practices, principles and beliefs, even if that relationship is marked by resistance and transformation. This umbilical affiliation reflects the inevitable regard of Southeast Asia's identity (and its constituent countries) as a consequence of the postcolonial imagination" (Tan M.C.C. and C. Rajendran 2020: 15).

The observation is highly suggestive for our research. An important point to consider when thinking about contemporary art in Southeast Asia is how people will confront diversifying cultural values in a neo-liberal world that has undergone colonial rule and a history of nation-building. Many artists are facing the past and history, sometimes digging up history that they have not experienced themselves, and exploring ways to share the historical memories with people in society through artistic expression.

Another characteristic is the influence of digital technology. Many artists currently active in Southeast Asia are collaborating with digital technology in various aspects. For artists of the digital generation in particular, their ideas and means of expression are inevitably different from those of previous generations. However, this does not mean that they are rejecting traditional concepts and methods, but rather that they are confronting them while exploring new methods of expression. This study will also focus on the sense of balance that such Southeast Asian contemporary artists possess.

The Body in the Physical Expression

This article will deal with a lot of physical expression such as dance, theater, and performance. What does the body mean when we talk about physical expression? Contemporary art is often created and performed in

response to social, political, and cultural issues. When people confront these situations, what is the significance of using physical expressions such as dance and performance art, rather than concrete arts such as painting and video? And what is the position of the body of the performer in such expressive activities? When it comes to physical expression, what is the body like, and what kind of expression can be realized?

The work titled "*Ibu Ibu Belu: Dancing through Borders*" created by Indonesian contemporary dancer and choreographer Eko Supriyanto, which I saw in TPAM (Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting)[3] 2020, gave me a hint to think about what the body means in artistic performance. The work alludes to the current situation in the border region of Timor Island and was performed by five women dancers. Four dancers are from Timor Island in eastern Indonesia, and one is from the Democratic Republic of *Timor Leste* or East Timor. Culturally common areas are divided by the national border, and people find it difficult to cross the border for families to visit each other. The work expressed the social situation of the women in the region, incorporating traditional ritual dance called as *likuray*, polyphonic chorus performed by the dancers, traditional weaving, and musical instruments from the region. This work expresses how political issues affect people's lives and the cultural dimension, and the physical movements, dancing, and singing of the five female dancers were impressive and evoked the cultural characteristics of the region.

In his interview, Eko Supriyanto mentioned about the bodies of the five women dancers as follows:

> I don't need professional dancers in this case, in this piece, not need the technique. I need the experience. I need more about feeling and how they coming from the loneness of them, the natural, that

3) TPAM is the abbreviation of Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting. The name of the event has been changed as YPAM, Yokohama Performing Arts Meeting.

> can be projecting on the stage. (Eko Supriyanto. Interview for NHK world on February 2020).

In this discourse, he regards the body as a medium of expression that accumulates experiences and feelings. As Eko Supriyanto pointed out, we accumulate various feelings and experiences within our bodies. The result of the accumulation can be expressed as physical movement and action, or as voice or song. It can also manifest as embodied senses of values or behavioral patterns that are ingrained in the body.

The body is what accumulates experiences over time, embodies values, and has explored ways of living up to this point. In this research, I would like to consider the artistic expression of such bodies.

The Articles

By examining contemporary art in Southeast Asia, we can learn about people who are facing the history of colonialism and nation-building, people who are confronting diverse values (while adapting to information technology), the expressive activities of people who consider the body as positioned in history and memory, and people who are engaging with society. This working paper aims to consider these issues through four case studies.

The period covered ranges from the colonial period to the present day, and the geographical scope includes British Malaya, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the United States where diaspora people are active.

The contents of each article are as follows:

Saori Hagai focuses on the experiences of Cambodian refugees, collectively referred to as the Khmer diaspora, who were forced to leave Cambodia before and after the Pol Pot regime. Specifically, Hagai's article examines how diasporic bodies have preserved and transmitted the tradition

of Khmer classical dance, *Robam Boran* in their new communities. The analysis centers on the Khmer diaspora in Long Beach, California in the United States, highlighting the diaspora artists' efforts to pass on this cultural heritage in local community spaces. Examining the activities of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, and one of her disciples, Prumsodun Ok, Hagai explores the role of the diasporic body in preserving and transmitting memory, philosophy and discipline of *Robam Boran*. While positioning the bodies of Khmer diaspora artists who came to the United States amidst the upheaval in their home countries as bodies inscribed with memory and tradition, Hagai's article examines the activities of these artists as they confront their own cultural traditions while adapting to their host countries.

Hiroyuki Yamamoto focuses on the Penang-specific popular entertainment form, *boria* to trace the process of integration of Muslim communities of mixed Indian and Malay descent, known as Jawi Pekan, into the Malays in Penang. Introduced to the Malay Archipelago via India, Islamic martyrdom plays developed in Penang by the end of the 19th century as *boria*, a popular entertainment characterized by its improvised lyrics, drama, and band performances. Early *boria* was considered a ritual for Indian Muslims living abroad but was not popular among the Malays. Some Malays called for the abolition of *boria* citing constant fights between bands, even though *boria* was considered a celebration for Malays in Penang in the early 20th century. Yamamoto's article examines attempts to make *boria* respectable and acceptable to society. Based on articles published in 20thcentury newspapers, Yamamoto demonstrates that the society began accepting *boria* following the organisation of competitions and performances at commercial amusement parks and state ceremonies.

Ai Takeshita focuses on the life and activity of a charismatic artist Remy Sylado in Indonesia. Takeshita's article examines how the memory of one artist (as novelist, actor, poet, musician) who pursued theatrical expression as a counterculture is being passed down, the impact of his live

stage practice, which expressed the anxiety and conflicts experienced by the youth of the 1970s, who were the first generation after independence, due to the rapid political transition from Sukarno to Suharto, the mentality being passed down until now. Takeshita also positioned theatrical practice through physical expression as a genre of media and examines how theater continues to fulfill its role in the era that followed, when various media have emerged. Takeshita's article seeks to delve into Sylado's legacy through the narratives of those who experienced his "extraordinary firework" firsthand, aiming to uncover the ways in which those memories have shaped their lives. Following Sylado's unique life trajectory, Takeshita also attempts to decode the dualities and contradictions within Sylado's inner self, with insights drawn from two Dutchmen who share the name "Brouwer."

Madoka Fukuoka focuses on physical performance in the post online era and depicts the attempts to execute online dance events. In the history of information globalization and media development, visual media has undergone various changes, and video platforms are widely used. After the COVID 19 pandemic, dance performances are becoming more and more online. By tracing the trends since the IDF (Indonesian Dance Festival) was held online on 2020, Fukuoka's article considers how physical expression has been represented in the online space, and how the value attached to physical expression has been changed. The formation of an art ecosystem through online platforms, is one of the characteristics of contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

These articles will examine the situations of Southeast Asian artists confronting histories of colonial rule, nation-building, authoritarian politics, conflict, and democratization, re-contextualization of art adapting to the global tourism industry. They also indicate the various topics such as 1) controlled bodily expression and those striving to liberate it, 2)physical expression based on bodily memories, 3)art practice confronting traditional society and values, 4)the diversification of values due to the globalization

of information, 5)artists with the skills to use information technology to express their own ideas and opinions, and, 6)the rise of the digital generation that makes full use of advancing technology. These articles will present an interesting current state of contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCzbXzrHw-o>
[accessed on 16th Dec. 2024]

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Carrying Memory and Tradition: How Displaced Bodies Preserve and Transmit Khmer Cultural Heritage

Saori HAGAI

1. Background

How are artforms learned and preserved when their transmission is disrupted by war? This chapter explores the experiences of Cambodian refugees, collectively referred to as the Khmer diaspora, who were displaced from Cambodia before, during, and after the Pol Pot regime of the 1970s. Specifically, it investigates how corporal representation of art anchored in *diasporic bodies* have maintained and transmitted the tradition of *robam boran*—Khmer classical dance—in new environments. With a history spanning over 1000 years, *robam boran* symbolizes "the highest in Khmer notions of beauty and identity" (Ok 2018, p.5). It is widely regarded as one of Cambodia's most iconic cultural traditions, embodied as an enduring symbol of "Cambodian-ness" (Sellers, 2010, p. IX).

In *robam boran*, the teacher's body serves as the primary instrument, embodying the essence of the art form and functioning as the central medium through which knowledge is transmitted across generations (ShapiroT 1994). Unlike other pedagogical traditions that rely on supplementary educational materials such as textbooks or visual media, *robam boran* has historically eschewed such resources, focusing instead on a deeply embodied, kinesthetic, and mnemonic approach to learning (SamCM 1987). The reliance on non-textual instruction is not merely a consequence of historical circumstances, such as the destruction of cultural texts during the Pol Pot regime, but a deliberate pedagogical choice rooted in the nature of the art form. It reflects learning in oral cultures, which has connection to

secrecy, power, and competition as well. The subtleties of *robam boran*—its gestures, rhythms, and spatial precision—cannot be adequately conveyed through theoretical descriptions or solo practice. Instead, these elements must be physically demonstrated, perceived, and embodied through repeated practice under the guidance of a teacher. Student attendance is not merely a formality but an indispensable component of mastering *robam boran*. By actively observing their teacher's movements and listening intently to instructions—even those directed at others—students develop a nuanced understanding of the art (ShapiroCS & Ok 2013). Despite historical upheavals and cultural displacements, the reliance on the teacher's body as the key instrument of learning has enabled *robam boran* to endure as a living tradition, passed down with precision and vitality. I argue that this corporal mode of learning has enabled a precise and yet artistic preservation of *robam boran's* techniques, ensuring its continuity as a living tradition despite the challenges posed by historical upheaval and displacement.

The analysis centers on the Khmer diaspora, highlighting their efforts to pass on cultural heritage in local community spaces. Long Beach, California, home to the largest Khmer diaspora population in the United States, has become a significant center for the preservation of *robam boran*. Residents in Long Beach have actively taken the initiative to sustain this tradition in a foreign milieu with the help of bodily memory that has transcended wartime dislocations. Notable figures include Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (hereafter SCS), a world-renowned dancer and producer of *robam boran*, who founded the Khmer Arts Academy (KAA) in 2002. Among her students was Prumsodun Ok, who became a choreographer and cultural ambassador, returning to Cambodia to establish Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (PrumN) in 2015 as the first gay male *robam boran* troupe. This chapter compares these two diasporic dance theater schools, analyzing their continuity, divergence, and resilience. This chapter addresses the following two research questions:

1. How are histories and traditions, inscribed in dancers' bodily expression, inherited and passed on to subsequent generations?
2. In what ways do diaspora dance activities confront traditional norms while finding timely ways for such embodied memories to be conveyed to the next generation?

2. Methodology

This chapter investigates the preservation and transmission of memory, philosophy, and discipline of *robam boran*. It focuses on the Long Beach area and two private dance schools, KAA and PrumN, which emerged in Long Beach and were later developed in Cambodia by members of the Khmer diaspora. In these case studies, I explore their continuity, transformation, and evolution. By employing a multi-method approach that combines historical analysis, fieldwork data, and interview findings, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of the two schools. The analysis highlights how *robam boran* has evolved through its transmission via diasporic bodies, showcasing the creative adaptations of the Khmer diaspora and the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in cultural heritage preservation. It examines their efforts to sustain and transmit *robam boran*, shedding light not only on the future outlook of *robam boran*, but also contestations about legitimacy that arise from innovation in new technique and identities unique to the community-led cultural preservation of the diaspora.

2-1. Historical Context

This chapter begins by outlining the political instability in Cambodia during the 1970s, which resulted in widespread migration and the establishment of Khmer diaspora communities in the United States. Drawing on prior research, this section contextualizes the sociopolitical

forces that shaped the displacement and resettlement of the Khmer diaspora, as well as their capacities and strategies for cultural maintenance.

2-2. Fieldwork Data

The data examined in this study was collected through intermittent fieldwork conducted in Cambodia and the United States between 2003 and 2022. This fieldwork explores how the diaspora sought to build community bonds by preserving and transmitting classical dance in a context where returning to Cambodia was not feasible, and long-term settlement and cultural infrastructure development in the multiethnic environment of the United States was necessary.

2-3. Interviews

Open-ended interviews, participant observation and other qualitative data collection methods were employed to gather insights from key figures associated with the transmission of *robam boran*:

-KAA: Direct interviews were conducted with both SCS and John Shapiro between 2003 and 2005 in Cambodia, followed by online interviews with them in 2022. The work of their institution was observed repeatedly in the intervening years.

-PrumN: Research on this institution began in 2017 and has been ongoing to the present day.

3. Defining the Khmer Diaspora in the United States

As the Indochina wars escalated in the 1970s, various waves of refugees and migrants began being accepted worldwide, leading to the possibility of diaspora communities. A key period for Cambodia began in December 1978, when a faction that had broken away from the Khmer Rouge invaded Cambodia with the Vietnamese army, bringing an end to the dictatorship of

the Pol Pot regime. Following the regime's collapse, countless Cambodians fled to the Thai border, where refugee camps swelled. Supported by the United Nations, interviews and procedures for resettlement in third countries were conducted, enabling many to emigrate via Thailand and the Philippines to destinations such as France, the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, and others. Despite the establishment of this resettlement process, conflict in Southeast Asia persisted, and the number of people seeking to leave the region remained significant until the early 1990s. Approximately 1.5 million people were displaced, with 51% (around 760,000 people) seeking asylum in the United States (Gordon 1987:153). Overall, it is estimated that around 250,000 Cambodians were displaced worldwide and between 1979 and 1983, some 152,000 Cambodians were accepted for resettlement in the United States (Smith-Hefner 1999:8).

The term "diaspora" originally referred to the forced migration of the Jews following the Babylonian Captivity but has since been broadly applied to people dispersed from their homeland by force or coercion. Because diasporas typically involve long-term separation, with little prospect of immediate return, Clifford (1997) argued "diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (p.255). In other words, diaspora signifies a state in which individuals are separated from their homeland, either geographically or culturally, but maintain some form of connection to it—whether real or imagined. Scholars have noted that the concepts of "diaspora" and "transnationalism" increasingly overlap. For example, Tölölyan (1991) observes that while "diaspora" was once reserved for groups forcibly dispersed—such as Jews, Greeks, and Armenians—it now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community (p.4).

The presence of a significant diaspora community has engendered

a debate among Cambodians about who is considered as an outsider (to Cambodia). Ratner's (2022) research, taking Ok as its subject, analyzes the discourse and tension associated with diaspora artists attempting to position (seemingly foreign ideas of) queerness within Cambodian cultural identity. Building on Hagai (2019), Ratner critically examines the classification of individuals such as Ok as "outsiders" to Cambodia. From one perspective, Ok should be considered an "outsider" to Cambodia, given his divergent political positioning and limited direct experience with the war and post-war periods in Cambodia. However, Ratner challenges this reductive framing, arguing that the Cambodian diaspora's connection is not diametrically external, but rather more nuanced, depending on diasporic identity and sense of belonging. While the classification of diaspora artists as "outsiders" in their home countries is open to debate, it is undeniable that these artists operate outside the cultural frameworks that historically nurtured their traditions. Although the cultural framework in Cambodia has itself evolved due to wartime disruption and globalization, I argue that the processes of their preservation, innovation and deviation in traditional performing arts emerging from the diaspora are influenced by their host society.

It is therefore essential to examine the sociocultural contexts shaping audience reception in host societies, but also to consider the embodied practices of diaspora artists that may strongly inherit and respect historical conventions. In Long Beach, for example, dance performances attract diverse audiences, not exclusively Cambodian. And as a consequence, within Cambodian diasporic communities, the traditional contexts that once framed these art forms are often not necessarily preserved. This highlights how artists like Shapiro and Ok navigate creative expression in vastly different environments from their homeland, even as they openly anchor their artistry to historical dance practice. Their work reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity, tradition, and contemporary realities within intersecting global and local frameworks. A deeper exploration of these

dynamics offers critical insights into the evolving nature of diasporic cultural expression in a globalized world.

The Khmer diaspora in the United States can be broadly categorized into three major groups based on their time of arrival. While these categories are interrelated and the distinctions are not always clear-cut, this classification still serves as a valuable reference point for understanding cultural background and motivations.

1. **The 75 People**: Those who arrived in 1975, the year the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh (Needham and Quintiliani 2007: 37).
2. **After 1980 People**: Those who immigrated during the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime (ibid., p. 37).
3. **Recent Immigrants**: Individuals who arrived more recently due to factors such as marriage or family reunification policies (Asahi 2009: 334).

While recognizing the complexities and interconnections within these groups occasionally, for the most part in this paper, all Cambodians who immigrated to the United States after 1975 are collectively referred to as the Khmer diaspora.

4. Dwelling in Displacement —"Being American," "Becoming Cambodian"

This section explores the question of how people compelled to migrate have managed to adapt to the sociocultural environments of their host societies while simultaneously preserving their collective cultural identities. This section explores James Clifford's *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), which offers relevant insights on this evolving experience. Clifford argues that the process of "becoming indigenous"

often relies on the performativity of cultural, artistic and ritualistic practice, both for internal (community) expression and legitimation for external audiences. The focus of his discussion is on indigenous peoples, who have historically been displaced by modernization, colonial domination, and political machinations. In new lands or territories, they are often subjected to assimilation policies that pressure them to abandon their indigenous identities in favor of being accepted as "national citizens." Despite such oppressive circumstances, he documents how communities often seek external recognition of their indigenous identities through activities such as festivals, publications, films, tourism initiatives, performing arts, art creation, exhibitions, artifact production, and ritual observances. By perpetuating their traditional cultural practices despite practical and political hindrances, these groups show their commitment to maintaining or reclaiming their indigenous identities. In this context, the inheritance and reproduction of traditional culture serves as a medium to assert a group's identity to the external world. Simultaneously, it acts as a performative practice within the community, reaffirming their shared uniqueness. As such, such performances are political acts encompassing both artistic and ritual dimensions, described as relation of "showing and telling" (ibid., p.47).

> "The work of cultural retrieval, display, and performance plays a necessary role in current movements around identity and recognition ... Heritage projects participate in a range of public spheres, acting within and between Native communities as sites of mobilization and pride, sources of intergenerational inspiration and education, ways to reconnect with the past and to say to others: "We exist", "We have deep roots here," and "We are different" (ibid., p. 223).

While Clifford's examples focus on indigenous peoples, his arguments hold relevance for the diaspora communities examined in this paper. They

share the experience of displacement under political pressures, the need for identity maintenance and legitimation, all of which establishes a common ground for comparison.

> "The language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home. This sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing. Many minority groups that have not previously identified in this way are now reclaiming diasporic origins and affiliations" (Clifford, 1997: 255).

The above discussions highlight how diasporic communities, compelled to dwell in displacement, actively resist the erasure of their ties to their homeland. They unearth their cultural origins, reconstruct traditions within new contexts, and strengthen communal bonds. In situations where physical return to the homeland is not feasible, their focus on rituals, traditional performances, and symbolic artifacts is a natural, if fraught, response. Giuriati (2005) argued that for people exiled from their homeland, questioning what constitutes their ethnic identity and cultural foundations is inevitable. Their longing for home is amplified through practices such as traditional music, dance, weddings, and funerals (Giuriati, 2005: 130-131). Sam-Ang (2001), a Cambodian diasporic scholar and ethnomusicologist based in the United States, documented parallel efforts in cultural preservation among the Khmer diasporas. His study revealed that, as early as the immediate post-migration phase, musicians and dancers initiated activities to sustain their cultural heritage, hoping to maintain cultural ties with the homeland (p.64). These artists, shaped by U.S. immigration policies of the 1980s, were dispersed across states such as California, Massachusetts, Florida, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Minnesota. In each

of these locations, they upheld the tradition of *robam boran* and established several dance schools throughout the country. This illustrates how the Khmer diaspora, while integrating into American society as "citizens," strived to develop a model for memorializing and actively living the essence of being Cambodian. To deepen this macro-level analysis, I begin with an overview of two symbolic diaspora private dance schools.

5. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's Dance Philosophy at Khmer Arts Academy

The Khmer Arts Academy (KAA), founded by SCS in Long Beach in 2002, serves as a platform for the younger Cambodian generation living in Long Beach to engage with *robam boran* and explore their cultural identity. KAA stands out as a central institution among these schools due to SCS's leadership, originality, and her existing esteem as a dancer in Cambodia. In 2006, KAA established a Cambodian branch, the Khmer Arts Ensemble (KAE), near Phnom Penh. Subsequently, in 2014, KAA and KAE were merged to form the Sophiline Arts Ensemble (SAE) in Phnom Penh. Although KAA, originally based in Long Beach, was absorbed by SAE, SCS has remained involved in the continuity of *robam boran* practices outside of Cambodia as well. In this paper, I will refer to the diaspora private dance schools led by SCS collectively as KAA.

The second school is Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (PrumN), a Cambodian dance school founded in 2015 and closed in 2023 by Ok, a graduate of KAA. While both male and female dancers were allowed to perform in temples during the reign of Yasovarman I (889–910) (Cravath 2007:50), the notion of "women's supremacy" in court dance—conceived in the 19th century (Nut 2015) and later adopted and institutionalized after the French protectorate—has largely restricted the inheritance of *robam boran* to women. In contrast, Ok, drawing from the educational philosophy he learned from SCS, did not exclude dancers based on biological sex or

sexual orientation. PrumN demonstrated how art can challenge societal norms and expand cultural traditions. By fostering inclusion and innovation in Cambodian classical dance, the company not only redefined the art form but also carved a path for future artists to engage in cultural evolution and social progress.

5-1. Shapiro's Biography

Born in Phnom Penh in 1967, SCS experienced the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, including massacres and forced labor, losing her father, two brothers, and relatives to starvation and death from exhaustion. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the establishment of the Heng Samrin government, which reopened the arts schools, SCS quickly enrolled in 1981. At the time, the few surviving *robam boran* teachers were focused on reviving the performances from memory and passing them on to the next generation. Her uncle, Chheng Phon, who served as Minister of the Ministry of Information and Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) from 1981 to 1990, played a significant role in the cultural revival of Cambodia after the genocide. Influenced by her uncle, SCS was exposed to *robam boran* and other performing arts from an early age. SCS graduated from Royal University of Fine Arts, Faculty of Choreographic Arts, Department of Dance, Classical Dance Course (RUFAC) - Cambodia's leading institution for dance education - in 1988 and, for the next three years, taught *robam boran* technique while also performing as a professional dancer. Her performances took her not only throughout Cambodia but also on tours in the Soviet Union, Vietnam, India, and the United States.

In 1991, following her marriage to John Shapiro, she moved to the United States. While raising two children, SCS earned a Bachelor's degree and completed the coursework for a Master's program in World Arts and Cultures at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). Realizing the need to establish a cultural foundation for the Cambodian diaspora in the

United States, she founded KAA in 2002. However, her journey was not without challenges. Initially, the Shapiros practiced in their guest room and backyard (Su 2021:49). Later, they established a practice space off the corner of Anaheim Street and Obispo Avenue in Long Beach, where their activities continued. SCS, as a dance teacher and choreographer, has taken on the responsibility of practical instruction, while her husband, John Shapiro, managed financial and administrative tasks. In an interview with John Shapiro, he shared the following:

> "As a couple, we chose for my wife, who is an essential and outstanding bearer of *robam boran*, to move from Cambodia to America. Since we are living in the United States, I promised to support her as much as possible in maintaining her connection to *robam boran*, to the best of our ability" (Interview with John Shapiro, December 13, 2003, Phnom Penh).

As previously mentioned, the Shapiros established KAA in Long Beach, an immigrant city, creating a space where the Cambodian community could connect with their cultural roots. However, from the quote above, it is clear that the establishment of KAA was not solely for the benefit of Cambodians living in America. It appears that for SCS, both as an individual and as an artist, it was essential to create a space where she could maintain her individual expression. In fact, teaching *robam boran* to the Cambodian community, forming a community around KAA, and engaging with concerns in the diaspora community led to the creation of the original dance work *Seasons of Migration* in 2005. This work was later made into a documentary film of the same name (see Figure 1), which received widespread international acclaim.

A story from *Seasons of Migration* unfolds as follows: One of the main characters, *Neang Neak*, is the daughter of a naga (serpent) with a long tail.

Figure 1. Documentary Movie *Seasons of Migration* (2006)
Source https://www.media-generation.net/DVD%20PAGES/Seasons/Seasons.htm

The heavy and long tail symbolizes the past that she carries throughout her life. The serpent, a creature that inhabits both water and earth, is capable of bridging the two worlds and does not shy away from movement. At first, *Neang Neak* is unaware of the weight of her tail and enjoys her new environment. However, over time, she finds herself unable to reconcile the burden of her tail (her past) with the happiness she has found in her new life. She begins to view her tail, which has become a hindrance, with disdain. She attempts to tear it off but finds she cannot cut it off or let it go. Removing a part of her body causes pain. Eventually, *Neang Neak* comes to realize that the tail is an essential part of what makes her who she is. In the end, she accepts her tail, and with it, accepts her identity. The message of the play ultimately conveys acceptance rather than rejection or exclusion. The motif of this play reflects the awakening of consciousness about "otherness" as a Cambodian immigrant in America, the negotiation between the past and present, and the human condition as people face various challenges and must constantly adjust throughout a fluid life journey, such as migration. *Seasons of Migration* addresses issues that are not only relevant to SCS but also to many diasporas who have faced similar realities upon immigration. In

this sense, the work is contemporary and practical, but also creatively rooted in Khmer cultural history.

The play uses elements of *robam boran*'s stylistic beauty (choreography, gestures, costumes) and metaphors, such as the naga serpent, to convey its message. It fits within the genre of *robam boran* in this technical sense. However, this play is notable for its transgressive nature, bridging both the traditional *robam boran* style and contemporary dance. The issue of migration, a central theme of the play, stands in stark contrast to traditional mythological stories commonly performed in Cambodia, where mythical characters move seamlessly between realms of heaven, earth, and sea. In Cambodia, it is rare, and perhaps even unwelcome, to create new works that transcend the boundaries of historical genres (Tuchman-Rosta 2014:538). Here, the important dimension is that, in America, SCS was able to innovate, explore, and create an artistic work in the style of *robam boran* that departs from Cambodian conventions in terms of content. Through KAA, she was able to flourish as an artist with new material. And in fact, SCS continues to create works that address original themes such as Cambodian politics, power, gender discrimination, and tradition, sometimes even engaging Western reference works, such as Shakespearean plays. An example of such boundary-breaking work is *Phka Sla* (2016), which deals with forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge regime, a piece which won wide recognition. In 2006, she won the Nikkei Asia Prize, further cementing her international recognition as an innovator in the arts.

5-2. Shaping Minds Through Apprenticeship at KAA

KAA has played an essential role in developing SCS's artistic sensitivity and served as an important contact zone for sharing issues with others. This is relevant in light of what John Shapiro observed (see quote above), noting they would support *robam boran* "to the best of our ability." As mentioned earlier, KAA merged with KAE to establish SAE in 2014,

signaling a fresh start primarily in Cambodia. This merger was driven by financial challenges that KAA had faced. For many years, KAA operated as a non-profit organization, primarily funded by grants from art promotion organizations based in both the U.S. and Cambodia. For example, KAA received artistic support from the Spunk Fund, a private foundation based in New York, and the Khmer Buddhist Foundation, a non-profit in San Jose, California, that has been active for over 40 years.

What sets KAA apart from dance training often found in Cambodia is the tuition-free model (see a comment from Mea Lath, a former directing manager of KAA https://lbpost.com/hi-lo/art/it-transcends-language-young-khmer-dancers-keep-ancient-art-alive/). The tradition of transmitting knowledge without involving a financial transaction is likely influenced by the teaching model at RUFAC, where Shapiro learned *robam boran*. This model reflects the historical way of learning *robam boran*, passed down since the time of the Cambodian court. In the long history of *robam boran*, artistic transmission has emphasized the importance of the teacher-student relationship, where respect, gratitude, and trust, rather than payment, are reciprocated by the student (Hagai 2024). Given the socio-economic conditions of the Cambodian community at the time, it is likely that many families did not have the financial means to pay for dance lessons, further underscoring the value of the non-monetary approach.

One of the characteristics of learning *robam boran* is the teacher-student rapport embodied in the practice of *sampeah kru*. *Sampeah* is the hand gesture for prayer, and *kru* refers to the teacher. The term signifies offering respect to the teacher, not only to the living teacher but also to the ancestral masters who have passed away. These figures, who have become deities of the arts, are revered as transmitters of artistic knowledge, memorialized continuously for helping to pass on their teachings through subsequent generations. The significance of this ritual is not limited to school practices but is an internalized value for dancers, as reflected in the

following excerpt:

> "…some individual dancers—starving and separated from family and friends as nearly the entire population was under the rule of the Khmer Rouge—risked their lives by trading precious grains of rice for incense and praying to the spirits and teachers (kru) of the dance to guide them out of this horrific torment" (Shapiro-Phim, 2008:59).

This narration demonstrates that, in the context of *robam boran*, masters and teachers are seen as a source of refuge during difficult times, offering guidance and support even when students face life challenges. At KAA, there are no strict written admission requirements or a selection committee for candidates. Decisions regarding student selection, curriculum, and operational policies are made at the discretion of Shapiro. Over the course of 20 years, at its peak, around 60-65 students per year at KAA learned *robam boran*, and the training space was often filled with students (Su, 2021:52). Shapiro emphasizes the importance of how students respond to technical instruction, but also their interests and personal engagement. She believes that dancers should be assessed based on their technical abilities and eagerness to learn, rather than being judged by structural characteristics such as their gender or sexuality. She expressed this in recent years:

> "What I focus on is how students respond to technical instruction and how much curiosity and imagination they bring to their learning. Therefore, dancers should be judged based on their skills and potential, rather than their gender or sexuality." (Digital correspondence with SCS, December 11, 2017).

SCS's educational philosophy contrasts with the approach of RUFAC, Cambodia's highest institution for artistic education which has strict criteria

for admission based on age, gender and other characteristics. For instance, RUFAC's entrance requirements include physical characteristics such as height and weight, whereas SCS's view is more flexible. She accepts students from around the age of four, when they can dress themselves in training clothes, and also welcomes adult learners. Her philosophy is designed to make dance education as accessible as possible for the Cambodian community living in the United States. This approach stands in stark contrast to RUFAC's traditional belief that only women can carry on the dance heritage. In an interview, I asked SCS whether there was any conflict in accepting Ok, a gay man, into her school. SCS responded firmly yet gently, adjusting my perspective:

> "I have known Prum since he was young, and I knew about his sexuality even then. He would often visit my training space, following his younger sisters. Eventually, he asked me to teach him to dance. His body responded well to my instruction, and he quickly showed remarkable progress. I did not accept Prum because he is gay. I accepted him as a student who demonstrated solid ability and technical skill." (Digital correspondence with SCS, December 11, 2017).

The fact that *robam boran* education was accessible to the Cambodian diaspora community in the United States is significant but also opening to heterodox participants is an additional layer of cultural evolution. If Ok had been applying to RUFAC, his entry would likely have been rejected due to his biological sex. Fittingly, SCS's position as a graduate of RUFAC means that Ok, despite being a male dancer, was still able to acquire the solid technical skills associated with RUFAC's lineage and embodied in *sampeah kru*. Supported by his mentor's open educational approach, critical creativity, and innovative spirit, Ok honed his skills. At KAA, not only Ok

but also other male applicants have been welcomed. As discussed earlier, in *robam boran*, the teacher is seen as a source of refuge during difficult times in a student's life, a place to seek help and guidance. Shapiro, who has known Ok since childhood, played a pivotal role in his development by providing encouragement, support, and discipline when needed. During key transitional periods in Ok's life, SCS remained a steadfast mentor, offering consistent guidance and support. This close teacher-student relationship became the foundation for Shapiro's success in not only mentoring Ok but also cultivating a new generation of professional *robam boran* dancers.

6. Cambodia's First Gay Classical Dance Company – The Philosophy of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA

Ok is currently one of Asia's leading young dancers, frequently featured in global media outlets such as TED talks, where prominent figures from around the world share their insights (see Figure 2). This section discusses Ok's biography, the establishment of PrumN, his teacher-student relationships, and the inheritance of dance techniques.

6-1. Ok's Biography

Ok was born in 1987 in Long Beach as the child of Cambodian refugees. His parents had fled to the United States in the early 1980s, and Ok was born in the US. However, in 1991, when Ok was just four years old, his oldest sister, who had already been married, took her own life after suffering from domestic violence and depression. At that time, Long Beach was a community plagued by poverty, violence, and racial and cultural conflict, which hindered the development of its youth. Reflecting on his experiences, Ok observed that Long Beach faced intersecting problems of poverty, violence, and racial and cultural conflict, which further hindered the growth of young teenagers (Ok 2013: 76).

Figure 2. Ok at TED Talk (2015)
https://wheninphnompenh.com/cambodias-first-lgbt-dance-company-prumsodun-ok-natyarasa/

Ok himself became interested in *robam boran* during this period. He would often dress in his sister's clothes and perform dances for his family. By 2003, at the age of 16, he began attending KAA, where his sisters had previously studied. For the first year, he quietly observed the training, and in the following year, he decided to join. In 2004, Ok became KAA's first male student. After honing his skills at KAA, Ok began to establish himself as an independent artist in 2006 at the age of 19. However, his parents did not necessarily approve of his decision. As Cambodian refugees in America, his parents prioritized economic stability over artistic pursuits, driven by their concern that a career in the arts would lead to financial insecurity. Ok was not recognized by his family for his potential as a dancer or for his sexuality, and he found himself struggling with the issue of gender boundaries within *robam boran*. As a result, he began to distance himself from his family. In 2005, Ok moved to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, where he majored in experimental filmmaking rather than dance. However, his desire to fully pursue *robam boran* grew, leading him to drop out of the university in 2008.

Around this time, Ok made his first trip to Cambodia, where he discovered that the gay community was culturally and artistically invisible

within Cambodian society. This realization inspired him to create the performance piece *Dance Before the Twilight Sky* (2008), which illustrated the love and marriage of two male deities. His reinterpretation of the Apsara Dance, a piece featuring dominant female figures, also garnered significant attention, sparking debate and criticism. In this piece, which has been a mainstay of performance at RUFAC, featured Ok dancing bare-chested, without any costume on his upper body, emulating the Apsara carvings of Angkor temples. His approach stands apart from the mainstream of contemporary costume design, which would have been typical in RUFAC. As Ratner (2022) acknowledges, Ok's work seeks to pursue cultural authenticity by drawing upon historical traditions while simultaneously striving to incorporate his artistic expression. This dual engagement with preservation and innovation highlights the tension between adhering to established cultural norms and reinterpreting them through a modern artistic lens. In 2015, with support from the Multi-Arts Production Fund, Ok began to expand his activities beyond the United States, performing in Cambodia. However, this expansion also revealed the limitations faced by a male dancer dedicated to mastering *robam boran*. As Ok reflected,

> "No matter how much I improved my skills, there was no place for me to showcase Cambodian arts in the American theater scene. Unlike ballet, *robam boran* in the U.S. didn't have a firmly established status, and it wasn't necessarily regarded as a high cultural art form. Rather, it was placed in a peripheral position as a tool for the Khmer diaspora to trace their culture and ethnic identity. Furthermore, in *robam boran*, which was traditionally passed down by women, I was the only male dancer, with no other male dancers to pair with. I had to create my own place for myself." (Interview with Prumsodun Ok, July 4, 2019, Kyoto).

From this narrative, we can sense Ok's strong motivation as an artist to carve out his own space—not only within the American theater scene but also within the world of *robam boran*, where no predefined place for artists such as him existed. To overcome these challenges, he had to create his own space, most prominently through expressions of his own body, much as post-war dancers have done during the war recovery period in Cambodia and abroad. In 2015, the Multi-Arts Production Fund grant supported a project that expressed the mythological union between the Khmer king and the naga master of the earth from the 13th century. For this project, PrumN began by featuring a gay male *robam boran* dancer in Phnom Penh. While following the stylistic traditions of Cambodian *robam boran*, Ok introduced a unique style that reflected his concerns about male-to-male love, minority rights, and diversity, themes that emerged during this period. In the audition, 10 candidates came forward, and after a 3-month training period, six individuals aged 18 to 23 were selected. This pioneering period also came with a common form of precarity in the arts. In 2015, PrumN's began by providing a monthly salary of $450 but maintaining this level of support was challenging and dancers slowly had to face the realities of the sector. While the candidates' potential skill were the primary focus, their mental maturity and capacity to overcome numerous forms of adversity was also a key consideration in the selection process. Ok envisioned PrumN not just as a company that would repeat typical *robam boran* performances such as the *Ramayana*, but one that would address themes such as homosexuality, sexuality, and love, challenging social stigma in the process.

> "The dancers who perform with PrumN were selected through auditions. While flexibility and technical skills were important, the candidates' mental maturity was also taken into account. It is crucial for those in PrumN to be prepared to take on a social role as sexual minorities" (Interview with Prumsodun Ok, May 7, 2018, Phnom Penh).

For PrumN's debut performance, the dancers experienced not only intense nervousness but also a test of their readiness. This tension was not just because it was their first performance with PrumN, but also because it took place at a government venue managed by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in May 2016—a public space with added visibility. None of them had the opportunity to express their sexuality publicly in their performances. Ok reflects that for the young dancers, the debut performance was a moment of liberation and responsibility. It was an opportunity to break away from the past, where they had been hesitant to reveal their sexuality, and to express themselves through *robam boran*. For Ok, the social significance of PrumN lies in creating a space for these young gay male dancers on stage. This mission echoes the absence of space he once experienced himself.

6-2. Beyond Classroom: Nurturing Identity and Independence in the Teacher-Master Relationship

Next, I examine the master-disciple relationship within PrumN. As previously mentioned, Ok's expectations of his disciples extend beyond the technical skills of *robam boran* to include their mental readiness. Many of PrumN's disciples have struggled with not being able to openly share their sexuality with their families or friends and had spent periods without opportunities for self-expression. In response to these identity issues, Ok provided support by being deeply involved in their personal development as dancers, while also encouraging their personal independence (see Figure 3).

> "*Robam boran* is a mirror that reflects the aesthetic and order of Cambodian society, but none of the performances depict sexual minorities. Because our existence is not represented, we are misunderstood, stigmatized, and socially erased. I want to create a space within the tradition of *robam boran* for LGBTQ individuals" (Interview with Ok, July 4, 2019, Kyoto).

Figure 3. Daily rehearsal of Ok and his apprentices
©Prumsodun Ok

From Ok's narrative, it is evident that through learning *robam boran*, the young dancers are provided an opportunity to positively embrace their sexual identities and attempt to create a sexual minority community. The desire Ok once felt for a sense of belonging has now translated into his efforts to create a space for his disciples on stage and in practice rooms. Indeed, the revenue generated from PrumN's establishment and performances not only supports the continuation of its artistic activities but also serves as a means for the students to achieve economic independence.

> "*Neak Kru* Sophiline (Teacher Sophiline) always addressed me with kind words. I model my approach on the teacher-student relationship, treating my students as if I were speaking to my own children. *Sampeah kru* practices this daily before the training begins, though it's brief. Training takes place every day from 12 to 3 PM, with discussions or shared meals as needed. If my student is hospitalized, I also pay for his medical costs if necessary" (Digital

correspondence with Ok, December 3, 2020).

It is notable that Ok's teacher-student relationship includes expenses such as meals and emergency medical fees. For example, in Chinese Qin Opera Theater, there was a mutual aid system where disciples would provide unpaid household labor in exchange for the master's teachings and care for their living needs (Shimizu, 2018:8). In contrast, in the case of PrumN, there is no live-in arrangement nor unpaid labor from the disciples in return. For Ok, this means that food and medical expenses become additional costs. Nevertheless, Ok's ideal teacher model is based on SCS's altruistic behavior, such as using her own funds to establish and run KAA as a cultural hub for the Khmer diaspora. Ok has internalized the notion that the teacher-disciple relationship cannot be confined to the ethical boundaries of the classroom alone.

7. Discussion

This chapter examines and compares the two diasporic dance schools, focusing on their continuity, divergence and resilience in how individuals navigate adaptation to the host society while simultaneously affirming and rediscovering the value of their cultural traditions. It explores how histories and traditions, embodied and inscribed within their practices, are inherited and transmitted across generations.

7-1. Continuity

One of the key commonalities shared by the two diaspora schools lies in the establishment of a master-disciple relationship rooted in the concept of apprenticeship. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, the transmission of *boram boran* historically followed a specific model: disciples underwent years of rigorous training, including apprenticeship service, while

living within the court alongside their masters for an extended period. They acquired their skills by imitating their masters' demonstrations and learning within an integrated community where education and daily life were inseparable. Within this communal learning environment, disciples engaged in an immersive process of discovery, exploring embedded knowledge alongside their peers. This approach to dance transmission was deeply rooted in the tradition of apprenticeship-based education in the performing arts. This form of education embodied a holistic approach, fostering the comprehensive acquisition of artistic skills (Groslier 1912, Cravath 2007, Hagai 2024).

KAA taught dance to Cambodian youth, and a defining feature of its founder's approach is that she has never charged tuition fees. This model—where knowledge is transmitted without monetary transactions—likely stems from the RUFAC school, where she learned *robam boran*. RUFAC, in turn, has inherited this system from the court period. As established throughout this paper, in the long history of *robam boran* transmission from the royal court era, the act of a master imparting knowledge and a disciple learning is the fundamental step in forming a master-disciple relationship. The disciple's "payment" for such guidance is not in the form of tuition fees but rather in the form of respect, gratitude, and trust. This system is also characterized by the altruistic values of the teachers, the long-term nature of training—including apprenticeship (the apprentice system)—and the deeply personal bond between master and disciple, which extends beyond the classroom and into everyday life. It is at this stage where conformity makes way for the independent expression of emerging dancers.

7-2. Divergence

One of the artistic ideals that SCS put into practice—and that Ok later followed—was the aesthetic of divergence. This is exemplified in *Seasons of Migration*, where SCS explores the diasporic experience in American society

through the lens of immigration. The long tail serves as a potent symbol of the self, deeply rooted in Cambodia's past—prior to migration to America. Ultimately, the narrative centres on acknowledging and embracing one's Cambodian identity, even amid a desire to sever ties with the past. This process aligns with Hall's (1990) assertion that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990: 235). Situating Ok's story within this framework, the long tail can be interpreted as symbolizing both his migrant status and masculinity. Within the discourse of women's supremacy in *robam boran*, Ok's biological sex rendered him nominally ineligible. Perhaps, through her choreography and content, SCS sought to convey a narrative of self-acceptance and resilience, emphasizing the triumph over adversity by embracing one's intrinsic attributes.

The question of gender and sexuality in the training of apprentices in the dance intersects with contemporary discussions on LGBTQ+ issues. As noted, the RUFAC school system restricts enrollment to girls—a policy that warrants critical examination nowadays. Ideally, the debate over who should inherit the art of *robam boran* should center on the skills and artistic qualities of dancers, as well as their capacity to serve as respected ambassadors of culture. However, it has often been reduced to a simplistic gender binary, framing the issue as a question of whether men or women should carry on the tradition.

In contrast, diaspora dance schools have fostered a more expansive and essential discourse—one that prioritizes the transmission of inclusivity, artistic knowledge and technique over the gender distinctions. In this regard, the educational philosophy of KAA is particularly significant. Rather than excluding individuals based on sex or sexuality, it deliberately seeks to identify the essence of a dancer through their artistic expression. The inclusion of gay male dancers within this framework represents a new paradigm for the tradition—one that challenges the RUFAC notions of

inheritance and expands the possibilities of artistic expression. Moreover, it raises broader questions about the role of sexuality in the performing arts and, more fundamentally, within education itself. Notably, the emergence of a highly acclaimed *robam boran* dancer from the American diaspora likely had a profound impact on RUFAC. The transformation from SCS to Ok was not merely an intergenerational shift; rather, influenced by SCS's open educational philosophy and ideology, Ok did more than simply inherit *robam boran*. He actively instigated both divergence—a consequential evolution—and transgression—a deliberate departure from tradition.

7-3. Resilience

The widespread inheritance of *robam boran* outside Cambodia can, paradoxically, be traced back to the devastation caused by the Pol Pot regime. The mass displacement of artists, teachers, and performers—many of whom were forced to flee—ultimately led to the survival and transmission of *robam boran* beyond its homeland. While this chapter has focused on SCS and Ok, they are one of many dancers who carried *robam boran* into exile. For instance, Kanika Mam, who studied *robam boran* in Cambodia from 1981 to 1989, relocated to France in 1994 and now leads a modern and progressive diaspora folk dance school *Selepak Khmer* in Lognes, outside Paris. These cases demonstrate that even when traditional performing arts could no longer be sustained within their war-torn homeland, refugees, immigrants, and members of the diaspora continued to practice and transmit their cultural heritage in third countries. Armed conflict, political persecution, and displacement have repeatedly severed the bonds between people and their cultural traditions—not only in Cambodia but around the world. Yet, in the Cambodian case, the bodies of individual dancers who have become part of the diaspora function as sites of collective remembrance, where the past is reconstructed and preserved. Separated both physically and institutionally from Cambodia's RUFAC school system and existing outside

the framework of American public education, the diaspora has sustained the transmission of *robam boran* through the embodied knowledge and memories of surviving teachers within immigrant communities.

At the same time, *robam boran* in the diaspora functions as an unrelenting critique of the political violence and genocide that devastated Cambodia in the 1970s. The teachers of diaspora dance schools—SCS, Ok, Mam, among others—are individuals who lost family members, homes, and communities to ideological warfare within their own ethnic group. When they perform *robam boran* in third countries such as the United States or France, their movements do more than embody centuries-old traditions; they summon the haunting memory of genocide and force into view the histories that Cambodia's national narrative may seek to forget. As a living entity that has endured political violence, *robam boran* is danced in the diaspora as an act of resistance—against forgetting, against erasure. It serves as a means of remembering the harm inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, a way to honor the suffering experienced by their bodies, families, and compatriots. In every performance, *robam boran* asserts that even in exile, cultural heritage is not only preserved—it is wielded as a form of defiance, survival and power.

8. Conclusion

Since the establishment of the Pol Pot regime in 1975, four decades have passed, yet the reverberations of that historical rupture continue to shape the trajectory of Cambodian culture. In her analysis of the Khmer diaspora in the 1980s, Giuriati (2005) offers critical insights that remain relevant to the ongoing discourse. Her observations provide a framework for interpreting the works of SCS and Ok as nuanced responses to the dynamics of displacement and cultural negotiation. *Robam boran*, as a living cultural practice, emerges as a dynamic space where preservation, transformation,

and deviation intersect, engaging with both the past and the evolving present. Giuriati (2005) notes, "different reactions and personal choices were made by individuals whose artistic interactions hopefully can create a bridge between the Khmer diaspora and Cambodians at home" (pp.141-142). This statement underscores the dual role of *robam boran*—simultaneously a repository of cultural memory and a vehicle for negotiating its evolving function within the contexts of both the diaspora and the homeland. The complex interplay between continuity and divergence within this art form reflects the multifaceted ways in which cultural traditions are reimagined, reinterpreted, and preserved amid migration and historical rupture.

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From Boorish Bands to Community Voice Tools: Transformation and Acceptance of *Boria* in Penang in Early 20th Century

Hiroyuki YAMAMOTO

Abstract

This article focuses on the Penang-specific popular entertainment form *boria* to trace the process of integration of Muslim communities of mixed Indian and Malay descent, known as Jawi Pekan, into the Malays in Penang. Introduced to the Malay Archipelago via India, Islamic martyrdom plays developed in Penang by the end of the 19th century as *boria*, a popular entertainment characterised by its improvised lyrics, drama, and band performances. Early *boria* was considered a ritual for Indian Muslims living abroad but was not popular among the Malays. Some Malays called for the abolition of *boria* citing constant fights between bands, even though *boria* was considered a celebration for Malays in Penang in the early 20th century. This article examines attempts to make *boria* respectable and acceptable to society. Based on articles published in 20th-century newspapers, this article demonstrates that the society began accepting *boria* following the organisation of competitions and performances at commercial amusement parks and state ceremonies.

Introduction

The Malays are distinguished by two conflicting characteristics—specifically, hybridity and purity of blood—that make their origins a subject of academic and social interest. In his study on the origins of Malay nationalism, William Roff (1967) unveiled the existence of the right-wing

faction, mainly royalists, and the left-wing group comprising socialists and Islamists in the early 20th century.

Roff's study on Malay nationalism, which covers the period before the Second World War, leaves an unresolved issue: despite the anti-colonialism and class struggle embedded in early Malay nationalism, Malay political leaders who spearheaded the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 belonged to royalty or accepted royal authority. This has left scholars pondering why early Malay nationalism — characterised by anti-colonialism and class struggle — has faded away.

Ariffin Omar (1993) traced the ideas and movements of left-wing leaders to highlight their vision of the Malay nation, though he noted that right-wing leaders assumed control of the political process after left-wing leaders were forced to leave the national political scene after mass arrests by the colonial government in the early 1950s. Ariffin's theory elucidates left-wing leaders' loss of influence at the time of independence, yet leaving a scope of explanation for the popular support of right-wing leaders.

Anthony Milner (1995) employed the method of intertextuality, arguing that discursive competition between diverse positions, including those of the right-wing and left-wing, shaped the public sphere in Malaya. Milner's work has paved the way for research on the formation of a common consciousness through literary sources from classical literature to 20th century periodicals; however, the question remains regarding how to capture the consciousness of a public that had distanced itself from print information.

One reason for the inadequacy of these studies to capture the divergence of ideas and behaviours between the leadership elite and masses can be attributed to their over-reliance on literary sources, an attitude that can be traced to Roff's work. Using Roff's research framework, they emulated Roff's strategy of capturing Malay nationalism, with a bias towards Singapore.

Singapore was the hub of print media in the Malay world in the early 20th century, when Islamic reformist ideas were brought in from the Middle

East and disseminated to surrounding regions. As Roff's study relies heavily on Malay publications in Singapore, it fails to equate non-Malay print media and non-literary information sharing and exchange of ideas through oral and physical expression that occurred in other regions, such as Penang. With extensive exposure to religions, ideas, and art forms brought from South Asia, Penang provides a diverse perspective that tends to perceive Islam as unitary through its ties to the Middle East[1)].

Malays in Singapore had a strong tendency to recognise clear ethnic boundaries between Malays, Arabs, and Indians among Malay-speaking Muslims. By contrast, there was a mindset that placed less emphasis on ethnic differences among Malay-speaking Muslims in other parts of Malaya, particularly Penang. However, Roff did not positively evaluate such ideas. When places other than Singapore are mentioned, Roff emphasises the context wherein their mixed-race origins were criticised by 'true Malays' or 'pure Malays' in other parts, predominantly Singapore.

For example, regarding Pen Friend Brotherhood (Persaudaraan Sahabat Pena, PASPAM), an early inter-State Malay organisation established in Penang in 1934, Roff's study, which highlights the ethnic integration of Malays, emphasises that its Penang leadership was mixed Malay and, therefore, repelled by 'pure' Malays from other States, failing to fully consider the significance of the organisation in developing the perception of the Malay population's diversity.

Jawi Pekan, *boria*, and Malay nationalism

This article draws attention to a community named Jawi Pekan, a term used by the Malays and British, often with derogatory connotations, for Muslims of Indian and Malay descent and their descendants living

1) For the study that reconsiders the history of Islam in South-East Asia from a different perspective from that of the Sunni Islam, the sect with which the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia identify themselves, see Feener & Fromichi (2015).

predominantly in urban areas of Penang. 'Jawi' is a Middle Eastern term for individuals and products originating in Southeast Asia, which—when brought to South East Asia—was understood by which foreigners within the Malay Archipelago could mix in. (Laffan 2003,13–14).

Jawi Pekan existed as an individual category in the first population census of the Straits Settlements, which included Singapore, Penang and Malacca, in 1871. However, it disappeared from the population census categories after 1911 (Hirschman 1987) because most members of the group had registered themselves as Malays (Fujimoto 1989,ii), probably in the wake of the definition of Malay in the Malay Reservation Enactment in 1913 that 'a person belonging to any Malayan race who habitually speaks Malay or any Malayan language and professes the Moslem religion' (Khoo 2014,127).

However, the incorporation of Jawi Pekan into the Malays was not as smooth as expected. Whether Jawi Pekan were included as Malays was often a subject of controversy, and such disputes were prevalent as late as 1931 (Yamamoto 2023). Jawi Pekan was frequently translated as Bazaar Malays, which was tinged with the meaning of being a half-breed and, therefore, inferior to 'pure Malays'. This preconception was exacerbated by the fact that Jawi Pekan was generally understood as linked to criminal behaviour. Jawi Pekan appeared in the English daily in Penang exclusively in articles on crime and court cases, indicating that the British perceived them as criminals; this practice continued until the late 1910s (Yamamoto 2023).

In recent studies, the term Jawi Pekan has been replaced by Jawi Peranakan, in line with Helen Fujimoto, who supplanted the pejoratively-used Jawi Pekan with the relatively value-neutral Jawi Peranakan when citing historical sources in her study[2]. By utilising Jawi Peranakan, Fujimoto omitted the perspective of the relationship between Jawi Pekan and Malays, which resulted in subsequent studies relying on Fujimoto's work to a

2) To be fair to Fujimoto, the same can be found in the work of Judith Nagata, who preceded Fujimoto's study.

decontextualised description of the association between Jawi Pekan and Malays.

To elucidate the time-consuming negotiation that Jawi Pekan were incorporated into the Malays, considering the evolution of the position of *boria*[3] in Penang—initially considered a practice by alien Jawi Pekan and known today as Malay folk performing arts in Penang—is relevant.

This article traces the development of popular entertainment *boria* in Penang in the first half of the 20th century and, accordingly, reframes an ethnically-mixed Malay concept developed in Penang during the rise of Malay nationalism in Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s.

Research on *boria* began as a performing arts study[4] and was subsequently part of historical studies to trace its religious origins and transformation. As the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated expeditious exchanges between South Asia and the Malay Archipelago, promoting commercial cultural exchanges in urban areas where immigrants gathered. South Asian Parsi theatre troupes were active in Straits Settlements, such as Singapore and Penang, and the ethnically-mixed population contributed to the development of art forms in this field (Putten 2015). Originating from Islamic martyrdom plays, *boria* was brought to Penang via India and became popular in urban Penang by the end of the 19th century and, later, changed its character from martyrdom plays to folk or local performing arts[5].

The bearers of *boria* have transformed during this process. Early *boria*

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3) It was spelt differently in the literature as *boria*, borea, *boriah*, and boreah. In this article, it is spelt *boria*, except where it is used in the original text in quoted passages.

4) Rahmah Bujang documented the form and content of *boria* based on a survey that he conducted in 1975 (Rahmah 1987).

5) Mahani Musa argues that *Boria* Muharram, which began as a form of religious ritual, eventually turned into a cultural activity by showcasing artistic creativity in all aspects of performance (Mahani 2003, 19). Wazir Jahan Karim argues that *boria* is significant because it demonstrates the secularisation of rituals that move with multicultural identity and intermarriage (Wazir 2009, 52). Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, who discussed the influence of Islam in *boria* and related Malay theatre, presented outlines of some typical stories and elucidated how it was accepted into films and other media (Ghulam-Sarwar 2010). Shakila Abdul Manan discussed how *boria* evolved from a ceremonial theatre to a unique Malay–Islamic cultural heritage in Penang (Shakila 2016, 25).

was predominantly practised by members of a community derived from the union of Indian men and Malay women in urban areas of Penang, known as Jawi Pekan. Initially considered by the Malays as a practice of immigrant debauchery, the perception of *boria* transformed from an alien Indian Muslim ritual to a local Malay performing art; in the 1940s, *boria* became closely linked to Malay nationalism, though the association between *boria* and Malay nationalism has not been fully explored[6].

Shakila Abdul Manan (2016) discusses how *boria* evolved from a ritual theatre to a unique Malay–Islamic cultural heritage in Penang. Shakila presents a selection of notable *boria* lyrics, demonstrating how *boria* bands resolved their internal conflicts and united under the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay political party founded in 1946, though he does not extensively describe *boria*'s development in the first half of the 20th century.

Wazir Jahan Karim (2018)—in a detailed discussion of the reception of *boria* in Penang in the 19th century—highlights how Muslim martyrdom plays were transformed into parody theatre by Muslim communities in the Malay world, in terms of decontextualising religious experience. However, with the exception of a reference to the abolition of *boria* from the 1920s, the evolution of *boria*'s position between the 1920s and 1940s, including the discussion regarding its abolition or acceptance, has not been exhaustively addressed.

Jan van der Putten (2015) proposes two critical points that provide a background to the covert links between *boria* and Malay nationalism. Putten criticises Fujimoto's study of Indian Muslims in Penang, stating that the observations are not based on sufficient contemporaneous sources. Further, he criticises preceding studies for overemphasising the violence that frequently accompanies *boria* and downplaying *boria*'s social and

6) Some studies have indicated that *boria* began prospering and receiving state support under UMNO (Rahmah Bujang 1987), but what is mentioned there is from the 1960s onwards, with limited information mentioned up to the 1940s.

commercial factors[7].

Contemporaneous information regarding *boria*'s development in the first half of the 20th century is scarce, with existing studies focusing exclusively on critical moves against *boria*, such as the publication and distribution of a booklet calling for its abolition in 1922. To compensate for the limited material available for content analysis because *boria* is an improvised play, the author uses articles from Straits Echo and *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* (hereinafter *Penang Gazette*)—two English-language dailies published in Penang in the first half of the 20th century—to trace the transformation of perceptions of the carriers of *boria* from alien Indian Muslims to local Malays[8].

Straits Echo (published 1903–1941) was an English daily published Monday through Saturday by a Chinese printing company in Penang[9]. It had a circulation of 750 in 1910, which increased to 8,000 by the 1930s. The editorship was held by British nationals, except for a short period of substitution, though articles critical of the British and colonial government were also published. In 1931, Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, a Sri Lankan, was appointed editor (in office 1931–1941), making him the first non-white editor of an English language newspaper in Malaya. Besides the editor-in-chief, the rest of the staff were Eurasians, Chinese, Malays, Tamils and Singhalese. It published information on the activities of Chinese and Muslim organisations through articles, advertisements, and readers' letters. Readers' letters were written by various ethnic groups living in Penang and neighbouring states and frequently generated cross-newspaper controversy

7) Anoma Pieris characterises Muharram as a 'Muslim–Indian festival' and considers it a meeting place for convicts and immigrant settlers in the Straits Settlements, which regularly developed into riots between communities. Pieris argues that the fight between communities in *boria* is not directly confrontational, but a struggle over space that rewrites space in a different imagination against colonial urbanisation (Pieris 2009, chap. 6).

8) When indicating the source, *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* is abbreviated as PG and *Straits Echo* as SE.

9) The character of The Straits Echo is discussed by Lewis (2006). See also Bilainkin (1932) and Saravanamuttu (1970), memoirs by the editors.

owing to their opinions on articles in other English-language and Malay-language newspapers.

Penang Gazette was predated by the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* (founded in 1803), the first English-language newspaper in the Straits Settlements, which merged with the *Straits Chronicle* in 1838 to become the *Penang Gazette*. It had a circulation of 650 in 1910. The board of directors included members of the Penang Chamber of Commerce. The daily gained recognition for representing the interests of the European commercial community in Penang (Shinozaki 2017, 42–43).

In addition to analysing the controversy surrounding *boria* in print, the article also examines the development of *boria*, including performances at state ceremonies such as coronation, and *boria* competitions in commercial amusement parks in the 1930s. The implications for context of the shift from street to stage wherein *boria* were performed will also be considered[10].

Boria in Penang: from martyrdom drama to street bands

Boria derives from an Islamic martyrdom drama. The tragic martyrdom of Husayn (Hosain), grandson of Prophet Muhammad, occurred in Karbala on the 10th day of the Muharram month in the 61st year of the Hijrah (680 AD). Poems were recited in memory of Husayn's martyrdom during the Muharram month, and religious plays were performed re-enacting the event in various parts of the Muslim world.

This practice—also brought to the Malay Archipelago[11]—is understood to have been introduced and established in Penang by the mid-

10) Mohd Anis Md Nor—discussing the development of *boria* and related theatre from the aspect of dance—noted that *boria* began being performed in the 1920s and 1930s on temporary stages built on empty drums or on tree trunks in the four corners, arguing that this represented the upbeat mood and attitude of Penang urbanites who saw the emergence of a new urban popular culture (Mohd Anis 2003).

11) The expenses for the ceremony of Husayn's martyrdom were borne by the Siamese monarch (Ghulam-Sarwar 2010, 94). For a complex historical trajectory of Muharram rituals in Bengkulu, Sumatra, see Feener (2015, chap. 11).

19th century through soldiers of the Madras Regiment[12], and spread among these soldiers, prisoners from India, and children born to them with local Malay women. In the month of Muharram, amateur bands were formed in each mukim (district) and street, which visited wealthy houses to perform, earning an honorarium to cover the cost of visiting the inland river to purify themselves on the 10th day of Muharram. These bands or performances were called *boria*.

An article recalling *boria* in the late 1880s, comparing it to *boria* in 1922, provides an insight into early *boria*, which did not have a conductor, used simple costumes, and refrained from using loud instruments, such as drums[13]. The *boria* bands stayed for about 15 minutes in each of the houses that they visited, singing mournful songs based on historical martyrdom and reading lyrics in a melancholic tone. The lyrics fundamentally pertained to Husayn's martyrdom. The march was accompanied by shouts of 'Hassan, Hoosain'. Indian regiments in Penang at the time also participated in the march. This lasted for three days, and it was not linked to the Muharram ritual. No fights between bands were witnessed.

The Muharram mourning rituals were eventually lost by the late 19th century, and *boria* was transformed into a money-making event without any religious affiliation. No precise information exists regarding how and when this transformation occurred, but according to one recollection, school students on McAllister Street in Georgetown, Penang, formed a band and sang English songs—such as *Yankee Doodle went to London*, a popular song at the time—and performed European dances during Muharram in 1888. The students collected a considerable amount of money from the audience, and numerous similar bands were formed in the following years, including

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12) The theory was first advanced by Houghton (1897), who wrote that it was brought to Penang in 1845. Subsequent studies have accepted that explanation, though some studies have suggested that *boria*s were in place before 1845 (Wazir 2018).

13) This article—written in 1922—is written as a recollection from '35 years ago', which corresponds to 1887.

non-Muslim bands. In addition to singing and dancing, plays with fight scenes were performed by the bands (SE 4 Sept. 1922,4).

These bands began wearing eye-catching and eccentric costumes, and the composition of the bands and structure of their performances eventually standardised. The bands had a lyricist called *tukang karang*, who improvised lyrics and guided other performers. The formulation was described in *Straits Echo* of 1905 as follows: notably, the author of the article refers to the bearers of *boria* as Malay, but they actually were Jawi Pekan according to the 'pure Malays', and as it would be discussed later, this had caused frustration for those who self-identify as 'true Malays'.

'Some of the fun-loving Malays form themselves into companies of strolling actors to visit, during the night, the residences of the rich, one after another; this form of celebration continuing every single night for the first ten days of the new year. Each of these companies or troupes has fifteen to forty people, amongst whom may be three or four females, who are all gorgeously arrayed in theatrical or fancy costumes. Their performance generally includes recital by one of the party of some tale of heroism, the first stanza of the lyric being taken up, after each verse, as a chorus by the rest of the company, who also accompany the singing with various musical instruments, prominent amongst which are the big drum, cymbals and violin. After the song, there is some dancing, and the entertainment generally winds up with a military drill *al' Anglaise*, after which, having received some monetary incentive, the troupe departs to repeat the same performance elsewhere. This, then, is what is known in Penang as a *boria* performance' (SE 18 Mar. 1905,5).

More than 30 bands were formed in the month of Muharram. They visited clubs and private residences of wealthy Chinese and Malays, and a single band would perform from dusk until dawn. They would conclude their performance and move to another place, making way for another band. It is believed that the gates of these clubhouses and residences were not

closed for several nights in the month of Muharram, and some bands earned as much as $100 per night (SE 18 Mar. 1905,5).

Clubhouses and residences were built on stilts, with owners and their guests watching the *boria* performance from the patio. The performers would stand on the ground in the courtyard and look up at the owners during the performance. To placate listeners in the hope of earning higher incentives, the lyricist would improvise the lyrics in praise of the hosts, and their success or failure would be measured by the amount of money that they receive.

Performance by visiting residences:
***boria* bands fighting with each other**

As *boria* became established as a lively night-time event during the month of Muharram, fighting between bands became frequent, frequently spilling outside the *boria* performance[14].

The bands eventually began lingering at the place of performance to prevent other bands from arriving. Bands waiting for their turn outside the gates would numbly throw stones inside the gates, frequently causing fights between the bands (SE 4 Sep. 1922,4). The *boria* bands were once associated with two mutually-opposed secret societies, the Red Flag and White Flag, with each flying their respective flags during the performance. The flags were visible from outside the courtyard wall to indicate which group the band belonged to, and fights frequently broke out between bands belonging to opposing groups.

Boria was often reported in English dailies in Penang as unrest between

14) Two secret societies—the Red Flag and White Flag—were at loggerheads in 19th century Penang, and the conflict between the two secret societies escalated especially during the annual month of Muharram. The two Muslim secret societies were each associated with a Chinese secret society, leading to the Penang Riots of 1867. After this riot, secret societies in the Penang Muslim community were restricted, but *boria* continued being used to secure members (Mahani Musa 2003).

bands, as presented in the examples below. In March 1906, a quarrel broke out between performers of two *boria* bands opposite the Chinese Club in McAllister Street, which nearly led to a fistfight, but the police rushed to the scene and prevented it from escalating (SE 5 Mar. 1906,4). In another case, a fight broke out between *boria* bands on Hutton Lane, and some Malay members of one of the bands were arrested for attempting to attack the house of a Malay member of the opponent band (SE 2 Jun. 1906,4).

Hutton Lane was well known for fights between bands during the annual *boria* season. Notably, 17 people were arrested for fights between *boria* bands in February 1907 (PG 23 Feb. 1907,4; 25 Feb. 1907,5), and 28 people were detained for fights between *boria* bands in Buckingham Street and Hutton Lane in February 1908 (PG 14 Feb. 1908,3)[15].

Moreover, there were reports of some incidents during the *boria* season: audiences being robbed while watching *boria* or while returning home from *boria*. In February 1908, a Malay woman, a performer in a *boria* band, was returning to Malay Club on Argyle Street in a rickshaw with a band member at 3am after completing *boria* in several places, when she was attacked by unknown men as she was leaving the rickshaw. She tried escaping in the same rickshaw, but the men, numbering around 15, pursued her until Transfer Street, dragged her out of the rickshaw, and stole her gold bangles (SE 27 Feb. 1908, 4; 28 Feb. 1908, 5; 29 Feb. 1908,5).

There were constant complaints from residents living in the neighbourhood regarding the *boria* performance being loud and noisy. In letters to newspapers dating back to 1893, they complained that they could not sleep because the *boria* was excessively loud (PG 22 Jul. 1893,2). On one occasion, the police seized the drums of *boria* bands after a European resident complained to the police regarding the noise (SE 26 Feb. 1907,5).

During Muharram months, *boria* was widely criticised, with columns

15) Notably, 37 Malay band members were arrested after a fight broke out between boria bands of the Kampong Kolam and Hutton Lane (SE 29 Feb. 1908, 5; 7 Mar. 1908, 4).

covering readers' letters providing a forum for debate over *boria*'s positive and negative aspects. A letter criticising and calling for *boria*'s abolition appeared in the *Pinang Gazette* in February 1908. The writer identified themself as a non-Muslim and criticised the Malaya practices of singing loudly after consuming alcohol, and wrote that it was 'like a monkey in a human shape' in the month of Muharram, whereas other parts of the world perform rituals to mark Husayn's martyrdom (PDG 14 Feb. 1908,3).

It sparked an extensive debate on *boria*, with the *Straits Echo* publishing the opinions in the form of letters from readers. The letters revealed diverse claims regarding *boria*'s origins, with many denying any link to religion. Some opined that *boria* had its origins in religious events, but that Penang's *boria* was a traditional event with no religious affiliation (SE 20 Feb. 1908,4); that *boria* was not a religious but a national practice (SE 25 Feb. 1908,5); and that *boria* was a fellowship gathering held on the Muslim New Year's Day but was not a religious practice (SE 28 Feb. 1908,5).

Although numerous writers opposed proposals to abolish *boria*, stating that it is part of culture, they also expressed disgust at the immoral behaviour of *boria* or its performers. This was symbolised by the claim that *boria*—despite being known to showcase melancholic martyrdom—was now considered clownish, and that while one welcomed performances by respectable men and women, in reality, *boria* was nothing more than drunken, wild, and crazy debauchees uttering vulgarities to the thunderous beat of drums (SE 3 Mar. 1908,5).

As illustrated in the expressions, the understanding that *boria* derives from Islamic martyrdom plays is no longer shared by many, and it appears to be an immoral and lawless practice. Some Malays were frustrated that such a practice was being conducted by Jawi Pekan, but the British considered it to be associated with the Malays because they were indistinguishable from them.

While street performances evoked mixed reactions, *boria* was occasionally performed in state ceremonies. On 22 June 1911, celebrations

were held across Malaya to mark the coronation of King George V. Prior to the coronation, a group of English-educated young Muslims in Penang formed the Young Muslim Union (YMU) on 15 October 1910, and resolved to participate in the coronation the following year. A general meeting of the YMU on 24 December 1911 discussed the possibility of hosting *boria*. *Boria* was held at the annual meeting at its headquarter in Hutton Lane. During the first performance on 5 December 1913, a tribute to the police was woven into the lyrics, commending them for arresting a burglar the previous day (SE 6 Dec. 1913,7).

Other clubs began inviting *boria* bands to their annual meetings. Efforts by the clubs to make *boria* a wholesome event resulted in the observations in 1916 that 'in the last two years there has not been a single fight' (SE 1 Nov. 1916,4), and that 'in the month of Muharram this year there was no fight between the Malays and Mohammedans' (PG 10 Nov. 1916,7).

Hamilton—writing regarding *boria* in 1920—noted that fights between *boria* bands had ceased. He wrote that 'in the past, frequent clashes between the two factions, Red Flag and White Flag, made the more peaceful Muhammadans of Penang considerably apprehensive regarding the *boria* season. Each formed a secret society in cooperation with the Chinese. However, in recent years, this unruly element had disappeared, with only remnants remaining on red or white cloth tied to sticks or seen as challenging references in the choruses of the theatre groups involved' (Hamilton 1920).

Claims that *boria* is a non-Muslim alien practice

The claims that *boria* is associated with, if not originated from, Islam led to discontent among Muslim leaders. Several members of the Mohammedan Advisory Board in Penang called for the abolition of *boria* in September 1920, triggering a renewed debate in the *Pinang Gazette* and

Straits Echo over whether *boria* should be practised or abolished.

A reader who identified themself as a 'young Muslim from Penang' wrote that 'Most Malays do not understand why this practice is done, but non-Muslims understand that it is a practice linked to the Islamic faith. Muslims understand this as an immoral practice that is not religiously recognised and is criticised by local religious leaders. Good people do not take part in *boria* and some even hate it' (SE 6 Sep. 1920,8).

In an article referring to Penang's *boria*, the *Utusan Melayu*, a Malay newspaper published in Singapore, wrote that 'the Malays in Penang talk only about this vice. I hope respectable people never participate in this evil practice again' (SE 6 Sep. 1920,8). Several readers countered the article through letters to the *Straits Echo*. One letter reminded the Singaporean daily that '*boria* has nothing to do with Islam, but is merely a practice of the Jawi Pekan of Penang, a mixture of South Indian Muslims and local Malays' (SE 14 Sep. 1920,8).

Meanwhile, opinions in favour of abolishing *boria* continued flourishing. 'This practice has been the cause of the degradation of Malays in the town. Malay boys run away from school during the *boria* season, and have been involved in *boria* without the knowledge of their parents. Those who take part in *boria* lose sleep over the week and some get drunk and sleep on the streets. Quarrels between *boria* members from different areas of the town are also frequent. Educated people and Mohammedan community leaders have been waiting for the abolition of *boria*'. The writer commended the Mohammedan Advisory Board members for proposing to abolish *boria* (PG 7 Sep. 1920,2).

The *boria* abolition movement's culmination was a publication marked by Yusoff Sultan Mydin or S.M. Yusoff, who worked in the Education Department, when he printed a booklet entitled *Boria dan Bencananya* (*Boria and its Evil*) and distributed it throughout Penang in 1922 (Wazir 2018, chap.3; 7).

S.M. Yusoff argued that the Malays were unaware of *boria*'s origins; respectable citizens did not participate in *boria*; *boria* provided an immoral opportunity for Muslims to increase their intermingling with infidels; and *boria* was an Indian Muslim practice unrelated to Islam and, hence, should be abolished.

S.M. Yusoff's letter accompanying the booklet provides insights into his thoughts. 'Although *boria* performers enjoy themselves, they are simultaneously degrading themselves and bringing shame on the entire Muslim community by their actions'. 'If our less fortunate brothers do it in ignorance, is it fair for you and me to encourage it'? 'None but those who like to see the poverty and misery of their own community will encourage this nasty performance' (PG 31 Jul. 1925,8).

By the late 19th century, *boria* bands were invited to perform at events to mark Chinese New Year with the Chinese lion dance, which infuriated S.M. Yusoff, who claimed that it has ceased to be an authentic Malay–Jawi Pekan theatre. He argued that other Malay *mendu* theatres should be encouraged to perform plays, such as 'Syair Abdul Muluk', 'Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang Cina', and 'Indraputra' instead of *boria* (Wazir 2018,92).

Moreover, there was a *boria* performance by an amateur Chinese theatre troupe known as the Teluk Anson Borea Troupe, which visited Ipoh, Perak, and gave two performances over the weekend at the Cinema Hall in New Town. It was the first time that the troupe was performing in Ipoh. It performed a Chinese play in two parts over two evenings, with numerous Chinese and Malays in attendance (SE 28 Aug. 1918,6).

Despite abolitionist arguments, *boria* was favoured by mukims, receiving invitations to visit the residences and clubs of wealthy Chinese and Muslims in the town. Bands with good poetry became popular, especially stories regarding Harry Carey's life (SE 13 Sep. 1921,6).

Further, there were some objections to the abolitionist argument for *boria*. The following letter is one such example. 'What we have seen in the

last few years is the police entering houses in the middle of a *boria* and telling the owner to turn off the lights and disperse the audience, which included women and children. They then seize the instruments. The lights are switched off, the band is disbanded and the audience leaves, but the pride of being subjects of the British Empire does not increase. The host spends time, effort and money entertaining various people, and just as the guests are about to praise the host for his generosity, a British policeman arrives, abuses the host for breaking the law, and threatens to arrest him. Why don't the police give the slightest consideration to Malays? We only have celebrations five days a year' (PG 7 Aug. 1924,5).

Seventeen Muslim leaders signed a fatwa stating that *boria* is not an Islamic practice (PG 8 Aug. 1924,4). About 1,500 copies of the fatwa were printed and distributed throughout the state. It clearly stated that *boria* was religiously illegal (PG 12 Aug. 1924,7). Some of those who opposed *boria* at the Advisory Board were subsequently satisfied with the status quo and began supporting *boria* (PG 1924.8.11:5). S.M. Yusoff continued advocating against *boria* until his death in 1945 at the age of 51, despite criticism from *boria* supporters.

Amusement parks and competitions:
***boria* bands competing for excellence on stage**

Competitions were held from the late 1920s in an attempt to promote respectable *boria*. Interestingly in terms of the multi-ethnic origins of *boria*, the predecessor of *boria* competition was a Chinese organisation Hu Yew Seah (League of Helping Hands), founded in Penang in 1914 to promote Chinese language education[16)].

Hu Yew Seah became increasingly active in the 1920s, with in-house

16) For the background to the founding of Hu Yew Seah and its activities up to 1928, see (SE 27 Dec. 1928,10).

debates and anniversary celebrations. The timing of the anniversary celebration was not fixed, and in 1926, it occurred over four days, starting with an in-house debate on Friday, 16 July. The last day, Monday, 19 July, was on the 10th day of the Muharram month, and Hu Yew Seah invited the *boria* band to the society's premise for a performance (SE 19 Jul. 1926,19). It was no coincidence that the anniversary celebrations coincided with the 10th day of the Muharram month on 9 July 1927 (SE 11 Jul. 1927,10)[17].

Various organisations, including newly established Malay associations, began inviting the *boria* band on anniversaries. The Penang Malay Association was established in 1927—inspired by the formation of the Singapore Malay Union in 1926—in what is considered a rise of Malay nationalism in Singapore. Whereas ethnic Malays were considered distinct from Arab and Indian Muslims in Singapore Malay Union, hybrid Malays including Jawi Pekan were the core of the community in Penang, and the Penang Malay Association's definition of Malay was Muslim, customarily Malay-speaking, and with at least one parent being Malay.

The Penang Malay Association held a *boria* competition at its annual meeting, where several *boria* bands were invited. Subsequently other clubs and associations began holding *boria* competitions at their annual meetings. The Music and Recreation Party awarded a silver cup to an outstanding *boria* band that performed at their annual meeting in 1927 (SE 9 Jul. 1927,8). The Rotary Club held a *boria* competition in 1928 to recognise outstanding bands, while several other clubs also held competitions to recognise outstanding *boria* bands.

Boria bands were invited to perform at the clubhouse during the *boria* season, with the best bands being awarded at dawn. Along with recognising the best band, the competition was aimed at reducing the incidence of fights

17) Starting from 1928, the anniversary was celebrated on 25 December, but the practice of *boria* performance on the 10th day of the Muharram month remained, with *boria* held at the society's premise on 28 and 29 June in 1928 (SE 28 Jun. 1928,3) and 15 and 16 June in 1929 (SE 14 Jun. 1929,5).

between bands. Additionally, the competition provided a sense of belonging to residents when the winning *boria* bands belonged to their districts.

The emergence of commercial amusement parks marked another major development with respect to *boria*. Following the opening of the New World amusement park in Singapore in 1923, commercial amusement parks with theatres and cinemas opened in Penang: Fun & Frolic Park in October 1931, and Wembley Park in July 1932.

A *boria* performance was held at the Fun & Frolic Park from 13 to 15 May 1932 (SE 13 May 1932,7). A correspondent covering the event wrote that *boria* had been a hindrance to civic life because it occurred throughout the night, and that it should be abolished because bangsawan (Malay opera) and movies were now available any time of the day in the amusement park (SE 23 May 1932,7).

However, amusement parks opened up new avenues of development for *boria*, making it among the most popular forms of entertainment. The timing of *boria* was no longer limited to the month of Muharram (SE 23 Mar. 1939,13), and in a shift from the past, *boria* bands went up on stage while the audience sat on the ground to watch them (SE 24 Dec. 1932,7).

Boria competitions continued being held in amusement parks. Outstanding bands were awarded at the *Boria* Carnival Night at Wembley Park in 1934. *Boria* was held on Sundays and Mondays, with cups for two outstanding bands and medals for the most outstanding *tukang karang* (SE 21 Apr. 1934,10). In 1935, thirteen bands performed at Wembley Park on Friday night and fourteen bands on Saturday night, with prizes awarded for three outstanding bands[18)].

The move to award prizes at amusement parks and clubs led to popular multi-award winning bands. For example, the Scottish Highlanders Borea

18) The winners were the Scottish Highlanders of Hutton Lane, with their distinctive skirts and bands; the second place went to Sir Majalis Kronchong Party, who performed music and dance in Spanish costumes; the third prize went to Evergreen Kronchong Party of Sungai Pinang, who specialised in kronchong music (SE 15 Apr. 1935, 7).

Party won awards at Wembley Park as well as at Bahrol Alam, Jaamatol Fatal, Malay Sporting Club, and Babul Rahim in 1935 (SE 19 Apr. 1935,16). It is believed that rivalry between bands has increased since cups were awarded in 1935 (SE 28 Mar. 1938,13).

Coronation and radio:
***boria* performance to an imaginary absent audience**

While *boria* was appreciated across ethnic lines at amusement parks, the idea of *boria* as their own folk festival emerged among the Malays after being linked to state ceremonies within the British Empire.

When celebrations were organised throughout Malaya on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the coronation of King George V in 1935, it was suggested that the Malays should organise a *boria* procession for the celebration (SE 13 mar. 1933,7). As the month of Muharram was set to commence on 13 April that year, performing *boria* after the 10th day of the Muharram month was justified on the grounds that it would only extend the performance by a few weeks until Jubilee Week in May.

A proposal was advanced that on 4 May, the coronation day, there would be a procession of *boria* bands from thirty five mukims (wards) and clubs in Penang that would be categorised into seven groups. The procession would have Dato Keramat ground as its destination, where the *boria* competition would occur, and prizes would be awarded to three marches and *boria* bands each (SE 6 Apr. 1935,7).

The final plan for the *boria* procession was announced 10 days before the coronation day, with a large number of bands participating. According to the plan, fifty *boria* bands would gather at Volunteer Headquarters at Peel Avenue, and would start the procession through town led by Hadiah Arabic School students and Malay School Boy Scouts at 3pm. The procession would be divided into seven groups and arrive at the Dato Keramat

ground at 6.30pm, by the time mosques, houses, and clubs would kindle their decorations. *Boria* and traditional dances and martial arts would be performed at Dato Keramat ground from 8pm to 4am; then, cups would be awarded to the three best *boria* bands (SE 25 Apr. 1935,7).

The final plan drew widespread criticism that there were only some wealthy Malay houses along the route and that it did not proceed through the Malay area[19]. According to those critics, there was not a single Malay house between Kelawi Road and Acheen Road (SE 25 Apr. 1935,7), and there were only three Malay houses of the 53 houses in eight miles from York Road through Acheen Street to Dato Keramat ground (SE 29 Apr. 1935,7). One critic wrote a letter to *Straits Echo*, stating that there were 480 Malay houses within three miles on Brick Kiln Road, Sungei Pinang Road, and Perak Road, all economically disadvantaged. As the residents would be proceeding to Dato Keramat ground on foot, they would appreciate if the organiser of the procession decided to change the route and follow that road. The critic ended the article by reminding that the *boria* procession 'should be for Muslims and Malays' (SE 29 Apr. 1935,7). *Boria*—once considered an alien event of Indian Muslims—came to be seen as belonging to Muslims and Malays[20].

As *boria* bands began performing, the importance of weaving tributes to the hosts into the lyrics declined, and lyrics were created to entertain a wider audience. In the *boria* competition on coronation day, the conceptual object of the tribute was King George V, 10,000 kilometres away from the competition venue.

For those who could not attend *boria*, there was a radio broadcast. As outstanding *boria* bands of the year were awarded at *boria* competitions,

19) The procession would pass along the following roads: Peel Avenue, Race Course road, Residency Road, York Road, Ayer Itam Road, Dato Keramat Road, Perak Road, Anson Road, Macalister Road, Aboo Sittee Lane, Nagore Road, Hutton Lane, Penang Road, Light Street, Beach Street, Carnarvon Street, Maxwell Road, Penang Road(*), Dato Keramat Road, and Perak Road, ending at Dato Keramat ground (Penang Road(*) is probably a misnomer for Magazine Road).

20) Despite criticism, the route of the procession was not changed (SE 2 May 1935,10).

there was an increased desire to listen to the *tukang karang* verses of the bands by those who could not attend the competitions.

When the Penang Wireless Society's ZHJ station began radio broadcasting in Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English in August 1934, it received numerous requests from listeners in Penang and beyond to invite *boria* bands to broadcast their performances on the radio (SE 20 May 1935,14). Malay Regiment Borea Party in Sungei Pinang was on radio on 1 June 1935 (SE 31 May 1935,7). The programme started with a kroncong singing by a trio including Hasna, followed by a *boria* performance under Janaludin as *tukang karang*, which concluded with Hasna's kroncong singing. Listeners who were captivated by her singing provided extensive feedback to the radio station, including suggestions for a weekly weekend programme on the radio to introduce *boria* bands and discover talent in the unique local performing arts (SE 3 Jun. 1935,14)[21)].

Controversy over whether Jawi Pekan is Malay

Boria had become a hybrid ethnic entertainment, and it was not uncommon for the Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians to participate in *boria* during the 1930s. A variety of music from Arab to Chinese was played as part of *boria*, and people would recite the lyrics long after the season had ended. *Boria* stories ranged from local folklore to Western thrillers, with many being Western dramas; however, gradually, the number of Malay classics increased. This has caused a reaction from the Malays that their performing arts are being encroached upon by different ethnic groups, indicating a growing awareness that *boria* is a performing art that belongs to the Malays.

In 1941, some critiques noted that *boria* performances were being

21) Initially, Miss Hasna was featured as the first Malay woman to sing into a radio microphone, but it was later discovered that the honour belonged to Miss Kiah of Kiah Opera, who had appeared on the radio the previous year (SE 3 Jun. 1935, 14).

held at amusement parks outside the month of Muharram, and that *boria*s were being used by different ethnic groups who owned the amusement park (Majlis 15 Mar. 1941,17). Further, the critiques noted that although there were prizes for best *boria* bands at the amusement park, the prize money was significantly less than the income earned from the admission fee (Majlis 15 Mar. 1941,17). As most people paying the admission fee to watch *boria* would be Malay, there was criticism that the amusement park organisers, who are of a different ethnicity, pocketed most of the admission fees paid by the Malay audience.

The Malays' growing recognition of *boria* as their own festival must be considered in conjunction with the changing perceptions of the Malay–Jawi Pekan relationship. The controversy regarding the relationship between Malays and the Jawi Pekan dating back to the 1920s is worth noting.

A fight broke out during a football match at the Dato Keramat ground in April 1923. Supporters of Hutton Lane Football Club and Crescents from the MacAlister Street rushed to the ground during the game, and a clash broke out between them. Hutton Lane and MacAlister street are two districts once known for their rivalry and fights between their *boria* bands during the *boria* season. An article in the *Straits Echo* linked the fight to a former incident between the *boria* bands, noting that the fight was the 'old *boria* business', and that the Malays were not 'born tired' but 'bone-lazy' (SE 16 Apr. 1923,3).

In response, Mohammedan Football Association President A.O. Merican highlighted the article's factual errors, stating that the fight was short-lived and order was immediately restored. He added that fellow Malays were natives of Penang and that he was uncomfortable with Malays being blamed in reference to the practice of *boria*, which is considered an alien immigration practice (SE 19, Apr. 1923,3).

This caused a controversy in the *Straits Echo* regarding the relationship between Jawi Pekan and Malays. While some argued that Indian Muslims

should not be treated as Malays because they are an alien race, it was recognised that Jawi Pekan and Malays cannot be separated in light of local social conventions[22].

As mentioned earlier, Malay ethnic consciousness rose in the 1920s, and Malay associations were established across Malaya, beginning with the Singapore Malay Union. While the Singapore Malay Union refused membership to anyone other than pure Malays, the Penang Malay Association was composed largely of Jawi Pekan, and a Malay was defined as 'a person professing the Muslim religion and habitually speaking Malay, of whose parents one at least is a person of Malayan race' (Fujimoto 1989,138). This perception was widely accepted in Penang, including by colonial administrators, through the appointment of Jawi Pekan to the positions of Justice of the Peace and Municipal Commissioner, which were assigned to Malays (Fujimoto 1989,142).

However, whether Jawi Pekan was Malay was again a subject of debate in 1931. In a speech to the Rotary Club of Penang in January 1931, Mohamed Arif triggered controversy when he stated that Malays had their origins in India and that any Muslim born in Penang and spoke Malay should be considered a Malay, no matter who their ancestors were (SE 7 Jan. 1931,7). It was argued that it was only true if the father was a 'true Malay' (SE 12 Jan.1931,7; 15 Jan.1931,7), and that even a locally-born Malay-speaking Muslim was not considered a Malay if they have a country outside Malaya to rely on (SE 22 Jan.1931,7). Further, there were claims that some people were hiding their identity as Jawi Pekan and acting as Malays to get elected as Legislative Councillors (SE 5 Jun.1931,7). Differing from the 1923 controversy, the question of 'who is a Malay' was closely related to political participation.

22) Examples of arguments include the following: several Muslims who identify themselves as Malays in Penang are not actually Malays but Jawi Pekan or 'Bazaar Malay' of South Indian origin (SE 1 May 1923,3); Jawi Pekan means 'Town Malay' rather than 'Bazaar Malay' and are, therefore, considered Malays (SE 2 May 1923,5); Jawi Pekan is 'Town Malay', which is an expression of the awareness of rural Malays that urban Muslims are part of their community (SE 8 May 1923,5).

After the 1931 controversy, Jawi Pekan was no longer mentioned in that newspaper. Subsequently, discrepancies between Singapore and Penang over the definition of Malay surfaced with moves to form Malay organisations throughout Malaya.

Malay associations from across Malaya and Singapore met to discuss the establishment of a national Malay organisation. When the first conference was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1939 following an initiative by the Singapore Malay Union, the Penang Malay Association, though it was not invited, sent a representative to the conference, and raised an agenda on the definition of Malay. The Penang Malay Association insisted that Malays with mixed blood be included, a proposal opposed by the Singapore Malay Union, which emphasised 'true Malays', and the Penang Malay Association was excluded from the conference. The conference failed to reach a consensus on the formation of a national organisation; a second national conference was held in Singapore in December 1940, but did not lead to the formation of a national organisation (Roff 1967(1994), 242; Fujimoto 1989,149–151).

Malay associations and *boria*: *boria* as a medium for political expression for Malays

When the Second World War ended in 1945, people eagerly waited for the resumption of *boria* competitions that were suspended during the Japanese occupation. However, resumption was postponed owing to the political situation. On its return to Malaya, the British proposed the Malayan Union, which would abolish the sultanate of Malay states and provide equal status as citizens to Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaya. Malay organisations across the country opposed the proposal, and the Malay-based political party UMNO was established in May 1946.

UMNO established branches in states, and the Penang Malay Association was requested to organise its state branch in Penang. In the

process, it was agreed that *boria* bands would not hold competitions in Penang until the Malayan Union issue was resolved (Straits Times 31 Oct. 1946,5)[23].

The Federation of Malaya was established in place of the Malayan Union in February 1948 after consultations between the British, sultans, and UMNO. The Federation of Malaya maintained the states headed by sultans and acknowledged the special status to Malays as natives of the country.

Celebrations were held on 1 February 1948, the day of the inauguration of the Federation of Malaya; a *boria* competition called Pesta Federation was organised in Penang by the UMNO state branch. *Boria* bands from 14 districts in the state gathered for the competition, each band flying the red and white UMNO flag instead of the separate red and the white flags[24]. The *boria* performance lasted until 4am, when S.M. Aidid, president of the Penang Malay Association, presented awards to winners (Straits Times 3 Jan. 1948,8).

Although the month of Muharram had concluded more than a month-and-a-half ealier, no major criticism of the *boria* at that time of year arose. In the following year, the *Boria* Federation met on Sunday evening, 30 January 1949, to celebrate the first anniversary of the Federation of Malaya, with approximately 10,000 people, predominantly from the suburbs of Penang, in attendance. The *boria* competition commenced at 8.30pm and lasted until dawn, with 21 mukims taking part. S.M. Aidid presented the awards at 6am (Singapore Free Press 1 Feb. 1949,6).

A *boria* lyric titled 'Pahlawan Cangkul' (Hero of the Hoe) was presented by a *boria* band at the *Boria* Federation event in February 1948. The lyrics by Abdullah Darus (1929–2010)—one of the *tukang karang* leading the development of *boria* in Penang since then—marked a milestone

23) See also (Majlis 6 Nov. 1946,9).

24) That all *boria* bands flew the red and white UMNO flag symbolically revealed that boria bands—once opposed to each other by district under the red or white flag—were now united under UMNO.

in developing *boria* as a means of expression for rural Malays[25].

Abdullah was born in Ayer Itam, Penang. He married Maimunah, the daughter of his Quran teacher. Through Maimunah, who liked to watch *boria* performances, Abdullah became interested in *boria* and joined a *boria* band in Kampung Jawa Baru, his place of residence, as *tukang karang*. The first *boria* lyric written by Abdullah was 'Pahlawan Cangkul', performed by *Boria* Kampung Jawa Baru at the 1948 *Boria* Federation.

At the time, George Town and the surrounding area was known as Tanjung. Its inhabitants were urban dwellers, comprising traders and government employees, who considered the inhabitants of Seberang, a village area, as underdeveloped rural people. 'Pahlawan Cangkul' was written to raise awareness amongst Tanjung people, who had a negative impression of the rural community.

The lyric begins by declaring that a *boria*'s role is to lend advice, and *boria* works as a guidance channel; then, farmers were praised for working diligently with hoe and plough; having a good harvest each year to lend them a good outlook for the future; having sufficient food to fill their stomachs and hearts; having happy families with wife and children; learning the Quran at night; and making the pilgrimage to Mecca with a healthy body. The life of a farmer is easier than that of a scribe, as legitimate income allows one to live without debt. Addressing the city's dwellers, the lyric concluded that 'The peasants deserve respect and if the blessings from nature bestowed on them are ever forgotten, the inhabitants of the cities will find themselves in difficulty'[26].

When *Boria* Kampung Jawa Baru performed 'Pahlawan Cangkul' at the *Boria* Federation's competition, the Malay audience expressed their admiration by giving coins and cigarettes to the band (Sohaimi & Rosmah 2010,46). The lyric struck a chord with rural Malays in Penang beyond

25) For background on Abdullah Darus and the lyrics to 'Pahlawan Cangkul', see Sohaimi & Rosmah (2010).

26) The full text of 'Pahlawan Cangkul' is available in Sohaimi & Rosmah (2010, 98–100).

Kampung Jawa Baru, which led to *boria* being considered a medium for Malays, including rural Malays, to express their views.

The *Boria* Federation event occurred on Federation Day, 1 February, the anniversary of the establishment of the Federation of Malaya, until it gained independence from the British on 31 August 1957. Driven by the *Boria* Federation's efforts, the practice of *boria* being held only in the month of Muharram ceased, and the systematisation of *boria* performances was enhanced by *boria* competitions from the state to the village level.

Boria developed as a cultural performance unique to Penang with the loss of its original significance solely as a Muslim martyrdom play. With the introduction of party politics and elections in Malaya ahead of independence in 1957, *boria* became closely associated with the Malay party and its politicians[27], and a perception of *boria* as a Malay folk performance developed.

Conclusion: from boorish bands to community voice tools

Islamic martyrdom plays—brought from India to the Malay world by the mid-19th century—developed into *boria* in Penang. *Boria* began as a ritual in the month of Muharram by Muslims of Indian descent and later became known for its raucous performances by *boria* bands and fights among them. The Malays detested *boria*, considering it alien and coarse activity unrelated to Islam, and calling for its abolition. However, by the 1930s, the perception emerged that *boria* was a folk festival of the Malays. After the Second World War, *boria* gained recognition as a festival of the Malays. However, the transformation was not exclusive, and it developed into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious entertainment before becoming a festival for the Malays. In the process, *boria* experienced performances at

27) The close relationship between *borias* and UMNO politicians in the 1946–1960s is elaborated by Wazir (2018, chap. 7).

boria competitions, commercial amusement parks, and state ceremonies.

Boria competitions were initially intended to bring together several bands to prevent fights between bands competing for performance opportunities. However, the competitions surpassed this intention and, by recognising the best *boria* band, awareness that these bands represented their area was disseminated among those living outside the cities.

Boria competitions transformed the style of *boria* performance, from individual bands visiting clubhouses and residences to perform for their hosts, to several *boria* bands gathering at a venue and taking turns to perform to an unspecified audience. Whereas in clubhouses and private residences, the *boria* band played in the courtyard looking up at the hosts, the bands played from the stage to the audience in *boria* competitions. Symbolic of this shift in gaze, *boria* performances, especially their improvised lyrics, transformed from a tribute to their venue-specific hosts to a community-representative expression of opinion on matters of public nature.

By becoming a major attraction at commercial amusement parks in the 1930s, *boria* became an event enjoyed by mixed ethnic audiences and also occurred outside the month of Muharram, thus reducing its association with a particular ethnic group or religion.

Meanwhile, by becoming a major attraction at state ceremonies, *boria* was accorded the status of a Malay festival in the process of institutionalising the ethnic categories of Malay, Chinese, and Indian under colonial administration in Malaya. Participation in state ceremonies led to the appearance of Malay presence in the colony, which was later linked to Malay associations as a framework for political participation.

To consider *boria* as a Malay festival became part of the negotiation of the relationship between the Jawi Pekan and Malays. Although Jawi Pekan and Malays both constituted as Muslims in society, the British frequently mixed them up and held the Malays in low esteem as coarse *boria* bearers, leading to the emergence of people among the Malays who emphasised their

differences with the Jawi Pekan.

During Malaya's preparations for independence, one issue pertained to whether Malays could be defined by the purity of their bloodline or by actively recognising their mixed heritage. While the latter definition prevailed in Penang's social reality, at the national level, the former was more prominent, reflecting Singapore's social reality. The social institutions and perceptions of strict Malay, Chinese, and Indian boundaries formed through colonial rule were adopted in post-independence Malaya. However, each state has practised its own system of ethnic classification and perceptions, in alignment with local social realities, as evidenced by the Penang Malay Association, whose main members are Malays of diverse lineages, taking on the Penang branch of UMNO.

A comprehensive examination on a state-by-state basis revealed that some of the things that are understood to be associated with the Malays are of foreign origin, which developed in a multi-ethnic character over the course of Malaya's commercial development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and became associated with the Malays in the period up to around independence in 1957. Recapturing history on a state-by-state basis will result in the decolonisation of consciousness through the critical examination of the stereotypes formed during the colonial period and revealing the development of Malay identity in the context of state and local social realities.

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Remy Sylado and the Two Brouwers: The Stage of Bandung in the 1970's and It's Memories

Ai TAKESHITA

Introduction

On December 12, 2022, the renowned Indonesian writer Remy Sylado[1] passed away at the age of 78. Tributes commemorating his death lauded him as "Maestro" and a "Walking Encyclopedia," celebrating his prolific career across literature, music, painting, and criticism. He was a recipient of numerous literary awards and cultural honors. Yet, his final years were spent bedridden at home, cared for by his wife, and marked by a complete cessation of creative endeavors and irreparable damage to his personal life. His passing, alone in a quiet room, was a somber and solitary end for someone of his stature.

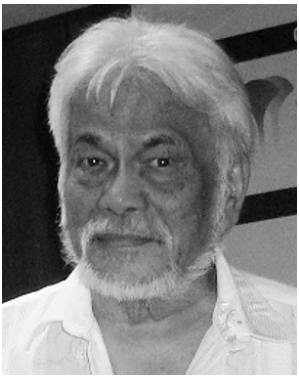

photo 1
Remy Sylado (1945-2022)
©Emmy Maria Louise

While Sylado's artistic reach extended across multiple domains, his creative journey began in theater[2]. After graduating from the ATNI Theater

1) Remy Sylado (1945–2022), whose real name was Yapi Tambayong, was born in Makassar, South Sulawesi. He was active as a writer, playwright, and musician. In 2005, he was awarded the Satya Lencana Cultural Medal of Honor. Sylado left behind many novels that shed light on lesser-known aspects of history, including *Ca-Bau-Kan* (1999), which depicts the fate of a local woman and a Chinese man who meet in a brothel in colonial Batavia, and *Namaku Matahari* (My Name is Matahari: 2011), a story about Mata Hari, a dancer who operated as a spy during World War I. In 2002, he won the Khatulistiwa Literary Award, Indonesia's most prestigious literary prize, for *Kerudung Merah Kirmiji* (*The Scarlet Veil*), and in 2015, he received the Southeast Asian Writers Award from the Thai Royal Family. **[photo 1]**

2) Sylado's highest educational attainment was at the Drama Academy ATNI, where he declared, "Theatre is a synthesis of literature, music, and painting" (Tambayong 1981, p. 39).

Academy in Central Java in 1965, Sylado began his theatrical career in 1970 in Bandung, 15 years after the Asia_Africa conference. The political landscape had shifted dramatically following the 9/30 Incident of 1965, with Soekarno's regime giving way to Soeharto's pro-Western policies. Under Soekarno, Western culture had been dismissed as incompatible with "Indonesian identity," but Soeharto's government welcomed its influence. After years of martial law and violent purges of alleged communists, Western counterculture—embodied by long hair, blue jeans, and psychedelic aesthetics—suddenly flooded cities such as Bandung, captivating the youth.

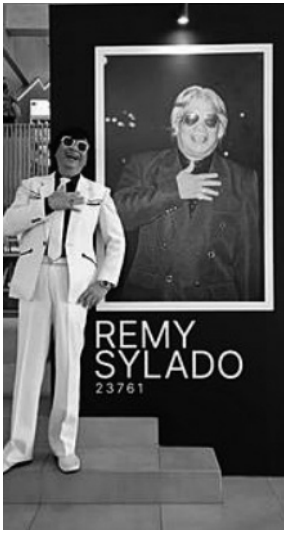

photo 2
©photo by the author

"At that time, Remy was an extraordinary firework," recalled Boy Worang[3)], who performed in every one of Sylado's productions from his early days in Bandung to his final stage in 2017. "And when the firework fades, all that remains is ash."

No recordings exist of Sylado's groundbreaking theatrical productions in Bandung, which reflect the era's technological limitations. Unlike today, when digital media ensures permanence, video-recording equipment was prohibitively expensive. Moreover, Sylado himself showed little interest in documenting or preserving his work. Rarely repeating performances, he allowed most of his scripts to be lost over time. Thus, no concrete evidence of his theatrical brilliance remains— yet this ephemeral nature is precisely what solidifies his reputation as a "firework." His impact transcends the titles of "Maestro" or the litany of awards he received; it exists in the fleeting yet unforgettable moments he created.

As cultural critic Susanto aptly remarked: "Indeed, it feels impossible to discuss Remy Sylado from just one perspective… It seems modernity

3) Boy Worang is a dramatist and social activist based in Bandung. **[photo 2]**

itself cannot keep pace with his movement and style.[4]" Sylado's dynamic and multifaceted nature defied simple categorization, making him a figure who appeared different depending on the observer's viewpoint — yet whose essence was undeniable in every portrayal.

Phelan famously argued that theatrical performances are inherently irreproducible; no technology, no matter how advanced, can recreate them. They exist solely in the memories of those who witnessed them[5]. To uncover the essence of Sylado — the creator of such ephemeral memories — I conducted repeated interviews with 60 individuals, including theater colleagues, close relatives, and friends who knew him during his lifetime[6]. The Sylado they described often appeared riddled with contradictions, and the more I listened, the more elusive his true nature became. Yet, as if realizing that a seemingly simple spark of a fire work is actually part of an enormous sphere, I saw the contradictions themselves beginning to reveal a fuller, more authentic portrait of Sylado — a man seemingly shaped by those very paradoxes.

Why was Sylado able to so profoundly move the youth who witnessed his performances? How impactful were his productions? With these

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4) Susanto 2019.

5) Phelan 1993.

6) In the course of writing this manuscript, I greatly appreciated the input provided by many individuals between February 2023 and November 2024. I would like to extend my special thanks to the following individuals for their invaluable support:Mr. Adi Ferry, Mr. Agus Sutanto, Mr. Agus Wahyudi, Ms. Ameriawati Atmadibrata, Mr. Anang Darsono, Mr. Arthur S. Nalan, Mr. Benny Soebardja, Mr. Boy Worang, Mr. Budi Ipank Pamungkas, Mr. Budi T. Assor, Mr. Cahyo N., Mr. Candra Gautama, Ms. Dinah St Gandhina, Mr. Doel Sumbang, Ms. Eleonora Moniung, Ms. Emmy Maria Louise Tambayong, Ms. Ermy Kulit, Mr. Ery Saprudin, Mr.Fahd Prasojo, Mr. Faiz Manshur, Ms. Frida Apriliani, Ms. Hana Sihombing, Mr. Ibnu Wahyudi, Mr. Isa Perkasa, Ms. Jais Darga, Mr. Jan Hartland, Mr. Januar P. Ruswita, Ms. Jeanelle C. Virginia, Ms. Jenny Huis, Mr. Jose Rizal Manua, Ms. Johanna Sophie Tambayong, Mr. Kemal Ferdiansyah, Mr. Kin Sanubary, Ms. Linda Inggrid, Ms. Monica Herlina, Mr. M. Yoesoef, Mr. Muhammad Syafrin Zaini, Mr. Muhammad Yusuf, Mr. Odang danaatmadja, Mr. Pamuki, Mr. Pax Benedanto, Mr. Peter Basuki, Ms. Rama Simanjuntak, Mr. Ratu Albert Moniung, Ms. Renny Jajusman, Ms. Ria Setyawati, Mr. Rosyd G. Abby, Mr. Saptari, Mr. Seno Gumira Adjidarma, Mr. Supriyo Priyanto, Mr. Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, Ms. Suwarti, Mr. Tatang Ramadhan Bouqie, Mr. Teha Sugiyo, Mr. Tekad Fajar Bowo Walyo, Mr. Untung Hadi Makalidirdja, Mr. Yanov Ukur, Mr. Yehana Setyo Rahardjo, Ms. Yenny Taksha Tambayong, Mr. Yoseph Al Pradja, and Mr. Yudhistira ANM Massardi.

questions in mind, this paper seeks to delve into Sylado's legacy through the narratives of those who experienced his "extraordinary firework" firsthand, aiming to uncover the ways in which those memories have shaped their lives. It also attempts to decode the dualities and contradictions within Sylado's inner self, with insights drawn from two Dutchmen who shared the name "Brouwer."

Sylado on Braga Street

The capital city of West Java, Bandung, was built as a colonial city in the cool highlands and has long been referred to as Paris Van Java[7]. Remy Sylado arrived in this city in 1968 at the age of 23.

By the time he was 20, Sylado had attended the ATNI Theater Academy in Solo[8], Central Java, and had even published a novel featuring photographs of himself playing the protagonist[9]. After completing his studies, he worked for a magazine in Semarang, the provincial capital where he had spent his middle school years. While there, he contributed columns and critiques on

photo 3
©Remy Sylado1966/B.P.,C.V. Alliance

7) "Paris Van Java" is also the title of a novel by Sylado, published in 2002. It depicts the hardships of a Dutch couple who came to Bandung during the colonial era.

8) ATNI (Akademi Teater Nasional Indonesia) was a higher education institution for contemporary theater established in the 1950s in Jakarta, Denpasar, and Solo. It aimed to develop professional actors, directors, and stage technicians who could perform both nationally and internationally, and to create theater as a national art that reflects the diverse cultures of Indonesia. It existed until around 1968. (Sumardjo, 1992)

9) The novelist Seno Gumira Adjidarma introduces and analyzes Sylado's debut work, *Inani Keke*, a play set in 17th-century North Sulawesi and crafted using playwriting techniques, accompanied by photographs in *Tempo* (Adjidarma, 2024, September 8). He also explores another work by Sylado in the same format, *Trabar Batalla*, which depicts a mestizo youth living in Minahasa during the Spanish colonial era. Adjidarma argues that these works, despite adopting the style reminiscent of formulaic dime novels, are distinguished by a dynamic blend of Sylado's historical and multilingual "encyclopedic" knowledge, visual elements inspired by 1960s contemporary fashion, and insights that resonate with postcolonial discourse (Adjidarma, 2024, October 6, 20). **[photo 3]**

photo 4
©photo by the author

theater to various media outlets. On a visit to Bandung during this period, he attended a performance by Studi Teater Bandung (STB), the city's prestigious theater troupe. Sylado submitted a critique to a local newspaper, describing the performance as "formulaic." This comment angered the troupe's senior members, though younger actors secretly applauded it[10]. This incident forged a connection between Sylado and Bandung's young performers, prompting his eventual move to the city.

Since the Asia-Africa Conference in 1955, the city's main street had been renamed Asia-Africa Street. This thoroughfare intersected with Braga Street, the bustling heart of Bandung's colonial-era commercial district, at Merdeka Hall, the site of the historic conference. Lined with shops, restaurants, and cinemas, Braga Street also housed the YPK Hall[11], a rehearsal space for various theater troupes. Here, Sylado established his base in Bandung. According to the poet Sutardji Carzoum Bachri[12], who had a close friendship with Sylado during that era, Sylado seemed starved for the stage at the time.Quickly gathering a group of local youth, he wrote and staged four original productions within just one year[13]. When a theater academy[14] was established in Bandung in 1970,

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10) Tempo No. 47/41, 2013.

11) The Gedung Yayasan Pusat Kebudayaan (Cultural Centre Foundation Hall) was used as a recreation facility for lower-class Dutch during the colonial era and became a center for the independence movement in Bandung at the beginning of the 20th century. In October 2024, the roof collapsed owing to aging. (http://narasisejarah.id/gedung-yayasan-pusat-kebudayaan-dalam-lintasan-sejarah-indonesia/)

12) Sutardji Carzoum Bachri is a poet from Riau, Sumatra. After enrolling at a university in Bandung, he formed connections with Sylado and others. He is known for his unique style of creative work, advocating for the "liberation of words from meaning" and drawing inspiration from mantras (spells). **[photo 4]**

13) Sylado 2002, p. 295.

14) The Akademi Sosial dan Seni (Academy of Social and Art), commonly known as Akademi Sinematografi.

Sylado was hired as one of its instructors.

On the first day of class at the newly established academy, a young Boy Worang was startled by the sight of his teacher. With long hair flowing past his shoulders, a floral aloha shirt, and purple eyeshadow visible beneath his sunglasses, Sylado stood out in every way. Worang recognized him as the man he had often seen squatting near YPK Hall with two hippie-styled companions, observing passersby. Those two companions—a man and a woman—were also part of Sylado's theatrical circle.

photo 5
Remy Sylado and Boy Worang in the 70's ©Boy Worang

From that day forward, Worang, along with his classmate Jan Hartland, joined Sylado and his companions. They began sitting along the roadside near the campus, eventually occupying a corner of Braga Street. This group of long-haired youths marked the beginning of Dapur Teater 23761[15)], the theater troupe founded and led by Sylado.

photo 6
The Maverick Dapur Teater ©Boy Worang

The Maverick Dapur Teater

Dapur Teater 23761 was fundamentally different from the aforementioned STB in every respect. According to Sumardjo, modern Indonesian theater originated during the colonial era among amateur theater groups formed by the indigenous elite. Unlike tonil, Western-style entertainment troupes catering to colonizers, these groups performed classical works such as Shakespeare and served as

15) The number 23761 represents the musical notes "Re Mi Si La Do" in numeric form. It is said to be inspired by the opening of The Beatles' "And I Love Her." However, according to Sylado's sister Yenny, it commemorates the date July 23, 1961, when a 16-year-old Sylado first performed with a band at a celebration, which was also their mother's birthday, becoming popular.

social spaces for cultivating Western cultural refinement. They flourished in cities such as Batavia (Jakarta), Bandung, and Yogyakarta, eventually becoming a driving force behind the independence movement.

After independence, new theater troupes emerged across the country, inheriting the idealism of these earlier groups. STB was one such troupe[16]. Founded by students from the prestigious Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), STB focused on adapting works such as Shakespeare or Chekhov. During the Cold War, it became Bandung's most prominent establishment theater troupe, receiving financial support from embassies of countries from both the Eastern and Western blocs, representing the playwrights' homelands. Around the time of Suharto's rise to power, the troupe was even commissioned by the military to perform anti-communist propaganda plays in rural areas. With its ample funding from public and institutional backing, STB maintained close ties to academia[17].

In contrast, Sylado's Dapur Teater was its antithesis. The word dapur, meaning"kitchen"in Indonesian, carries connotations of a space for preparing and mixing various ingredients. It also evokes the idea of a domestic, behind-the-scenes environment tied to the everyday struggles of life. This eclectic group comprised inexperienced young people, whose performances drew inspiration from the mundane, everyday happenings around them. With few sponsors, the members themselves raised the funds to sustain their activities.

photo 7
Boy Worang and Jan Hartland. They entered the Theatre Academy in the same year and became the golden duo representing Dapur Teater
©Boy Worang

Despite—or perhaps because of—its raw and unpolished approach, Dapur Teater quickly captivated the younger generation. A 1971 article in Pikiran Rakyat described the overwhelming response to one of their performances:

16) Sumardjo 1993, op. cit., pp. 121-125.

17) Abdulah, Tatang, et al. 2015.

"The 400 seats of Rumentang Siang Theater filled up in no time, forcing many of Remy Sylado's fans to stand. According to theater staff, such an event was unprecedented in the venue's history.[18)]"

Throughout the 1970s, Dapur Teater and Remy Sylado swept through Bandung, leaving an indelible mark on the city's youth.

OREXAS

During the Cold War, as Soeharto's new regime embraced a pro-Western economic development agenda, the Western culture once shunned as cultural imperialism under Soekarno found its way into Bandung. The city was soon alive with young people sporting long hair, bell-bottom jeans, high-heeled London boots, and miniskirts. Amid the bustling crowds of Braga Street, one group stood out — Remy Sylado and his troupe, nicknamed OREXAS by onlookers.

Soon after arriving in Bandung, Sylado became involved in producing a youth magazine. What began as a modest, locally circulated zine eventually evolved into *Aktuil*, a national sensation and a defining publication for Indonesia's youth[19)]. The transformation was catalyzed in 1971 when Sylado began serializing his novel OREXAS in its pages. The title, an acronym for Organisasi Sex Bebas ("Free Sex Organization"), captured the zeitgeist of the counterculture movement, portraying the hedonistic lives of Bandung's "hippies." The novel, originally conceived as a script for Dapur Teater's stage, drew heavily from the group's

photo 8
The cover of *Aktuil* magazine.
©photo by the author

18) *Pikiran Rakyat*, October 24, 1971.

19) Launched in 1967 as Indonesia's first youth-oriented entertainment magazine, it covered domestic and international information on music and other topics of interest to the younger generation, using consumption of entertainment information originating from the West as a benchmark for "youthfulness." It served as a medium that conceptualized the first post-independence generation of readers in Indonesia into a category known as the "younger generation." (Takeshita 2011)

anarchic daily lives.

The theatrical adaptation of OREXAS opened with a defiant and provocative chant:

"Let us pray: curses upon our hypocritical parents! Diabetes! Plague! Hypertension! Parasites! May every curse befall them! Amen!"

An adaptation of the American musical *Hair*[20], the production became a cultural flashpoint. It laid bare the generational rift, with young performers delivering scathing critiques of their parents' hypocrisy. Scenes of marijuana smoking, casual sex, and masturbation depicted the moral rebellion of youth while sparking outrage among the older generation.

This unapologetically taboo-breaking performance was dismissed by orthodox theater circles as sensationalist kitsch, derisively branded "Remy's style." Sylado frequently found himself summoned by authorities, yet he remained resolute in his stance:

"What's wrong with depicting reality? Art sanitized for pretense is worthless.[21]"

This rebellious philosophy permeated his work at *Aktuil*, which became a vehicle for his vision and catapulted him into national prominence. In 1972, he introduced the "Puisi Mbeling" ("Rebellious Poetry") column, inviting readers to submit provocative free verse. The term mbeling connoted defiance, and the poetry often featured vulgarity, drug references, and sexual slang—material deemed unfit for traditional literary magazines such as *Horison*. Sylado openly criticized *Horison* for its elitism, positioning Puisi Mbeling as a literary

photo 9
Many people in Bandung believed that the members of Dapur Theatre, who often gathered on Braga Street, were the real-life *OREXAS*. ©Boy Worang

20) This rock musical, which premiered in 1967, stands apart from the traditional Broadway format and symbolizes American counterculture. It reflects the social and political issues of the time and has been adapted worldwide.

21) *Aktuil* No. 87, 1971.

counterculture movement.

Aktuil itself originated from the efforts of Bandung's youth, who used makeshift printing equipment to create a magazine that bridged the cultural gap between Indonesia and the West. In a country where television and telecommunications were still underdeveloped, the magazine provided a vital window into the global counterculture. Sylado's contributions—spanning fiction, poetry, essays, and criticism—were prolific, incendiary, and electrifying, akin to the psychedelic ethos[22] he championed. By 1972, *Aktuil* had surpassed Tempo to become Indonesia's highest-circulating magazine, with Sylado as its most potent creative force. His influence drew countless young readers to the theater, transforming the cultural landscape.

On a national scale, However, Jakarta's Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) cultural center remained the epicenter of Indonesian theater. Established in 1968 with government support, TIM fostered the careers of the so-called "Big 3" playwrights—Rendra, Arifin C. Noor, and Teguh Karya. Among them, Rendra, who had studied in the United States, gained acclaim for his spectacular plays, which subtly critiqued Suharto's regime. His experimental minimalist productions leveraged TIM's state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems, capturing the attention of intellectuals and cultural elites[23].

photo 10
a scene from *A Branch of Jasmine for Lima.*
©Jan Hartland

While Sylado was often hailed by the media as the "Fourth Newcomer" alongside the Big 3[24], he rejected such comparisons and viewed TIM with disdain. To him, the state-controlled institution

22) In the 1969 edition of *Aktuil*, readers commented on the ongoing cultural debate between Sylado and STB playwright Saini KM featured in the magazine, saying, "Sylado's discourse is like a psychedelic poster." (*Aktuil* No. 27, 1969)

23) Regarding Rendra's silent drama, which Gunawan Mohamad termed "Mini Kata" (Minimum Word), Sylado described his own expression as "Maxi Kata" (Maximum Word).

24) *Tempo*, August 12, 1972.

epitomized the establishment culture he opposed. Sylado remained steadfastly loyal to Bandung, where theaters were colonial-era relics devoid of modern equipment. Yet these limitations suited his artistic ethos; Sylado eschewed technical embellishments, relying instead on the unamplified power of the human voice.

One memorable performance of OREXAS illustrated his audacious approach. As the curtain rose, the stage remained pitch black until a sudden explosion of sound and light revealed dozens of motorcycles roaring onto the stage. Their headlights cut through the darkness as engines revved, creating a chaotic and electrifying atmosphere. This bald spectacle led to Dapur Teater being banned from the esteemed Lyceum Theater, a colonial-era venue. However, rather than alienating audiences, such incidents only amplified the fervor of Bandung's youth, who flocked to Sylado's productions with even greater enthusiasm.

The Youth Who Gathered on Stage

From the moment Remy Sylado began appearing on Braga Street, he was rarely seen without his two hippie companions: Benny Ditus and Juju Romila, the latter also his girlfriend. Near Juju's home in the working-class neighborhood of Babakan Ciamis lived a boy named Tatang, whom Sylado doted on during his frequent visits to see Juju. One day, Sylado brought the little Tatang to a rehearsal, where the boy was astonished to see Benny Ditus, with his dark skin and Afro hairstyle, cast as the lead role of Jesus Christ. Benny, a local petty thug, was hardly the conventional choice for such a role.

Sylado often gave Tatang unorthodox advice: "If you're going to pick a fight, choose someone bigger than you. Even if you lose, you'll be the one who stands out." This philosophy reflected Sylado's own approach to life. In 1969, *Aktuil* magazine published a column by Sylado about a theater competition in Bandung featuring 28 amateur troupes. His

play *Generasi Semau Gue* ("The Do-As-You-Please Generation"), performed with Juju Romila[25] and others, was selected as a finalist alongside a university troupe. Most participants, however, were middle and high school students, and the judges were prominent figures in the theater world, including STB founder Suyatna Anirum. Sylado fiercely criticized the judges, arguing that pitting young students against older, more experienced performers ran counter to the competition's goal of fostering interest in theater among beginners. He also condemned the judges' authoritarian critiques as oppressive and discouraging[26].

photo 11
Juju Romila with Jan Hartland
©Jan Hartland

For young people, Sylado's bold defiance of authority and subversion of social norms struck a powerful chord. They celebrated his audacity, which they saw as a reflection of their own frustrations. Before long, an eclectic mix of followers—ranging from petty delinquents to the children of government officials and wealthy industrialists—gathered around Sylado. These young people took turns performing in his productions, finding in him a voice that represented their rebellion.

Unlike Jakarta, where access to recording and broadcasting technology could propel performers into professional careers in music or film, Bandung lacked such infrastructure. Nevertheless, this mattered little to Sylado's followers. What drew them in was the chance to share his stage, hurl insults at authority figures, and bask in the cheers of the audience.

From the late 1960s into the 1970s, urban centers like Bandung and Jakarta were rife with sensational tales of "moral decadence." Among the affluent youth, acts of rebellion—drug use, promiscuity, and reckless street racing—became fashionable. Beneath these behaviors lay deeper societal

25) [photo 11]

26) *Aktuil* No. 36, 1967.

fractures: a generational divide and widespread anxiety stemming from the political turmoil following the 9/30 incident. Yet many parents chose to ignore these underlying issues. Instead, they lamented the erosion of "Indonesian identity" and "independence spirit," blaming the rapid influx of Western culture for their children's waywardness. This generation of parents—responsible for initiating the Westernization and development policies they now criticized—remained blind to their own contradictions and hypocrisy.

Sylado's stage offered a unique counterpoint: a space where the youth could reverse the narrative, exposing and ridiculing the authority figures who had failed them. By staging scenes of marijuana use, promiscuity, and other "deviant" behaviors, these performances became acts of defiance and declarations of self-assertion.

Despite these themes, Sylado enforced strict discipline during rehearsals. He prohibited not only drug use but also smoking, demanding punctuality and order from his cast. Live theater, he insisted, allowed no room for error—every performer's contribution had to align seamlessly to ensure the production's success. He frequently reminded them that a single performance depended on each individual fulfilling their responsibility. His words resonated deeply, and the young actors came to understand their truth as the curtain fell amid applause and cheers.

photo 12
Gito Rollies ©*kompas*

For many, the experience of performing on stage with Sylado sparked personal transformation. One well-known example is Gito Rollies, a musician who overcame severe drug addiction after joining one of Sylado's productions[27]. Others—particularly the children of absentee parents such as high-ranking government and

27) *Kompas* March 2, 2008. **[photo 12]**

military officials — found Sylado's rehearsals to be a catalyst for self-discovery and improvement. For some, the stage offered a momentary reprieve from deeply rooted trauma.

photo 13
Jenny Suharto (Huis) with Remy Sylado, Boy Worang and Jan Hartland ©Jan Hartland

Jenny Suharto[28], for instance, was eight years old when she witnessed a massacre near her family's home in Jakarta, shortly after the 9/30 incident. The sight of soldiers killing suspected communists haunted her throughout her childhood, compounded by the social unrest that followed. Yet, after participating in one of Sylado's productions, she became captivated by the experience. Despite keeping her involvement hidden from her parents, she returned to the stage time and again.

Both Sylado and his followers belonged to Indonesia's first post-independence generation. Born as Indonesians without having experienced the struggle for independence, they came of age amid political upheaval and social transformation. When rock 'n' roll and bell-bottom jeans became accessible, they embraced these trends wholeheartedly, only to be denounced by their parents for lacking historical consciousness and national pride. Sylado turned this generational conflict into theater, offering young people a stage where they could scrutinize their elders from their own perspective.

Muhammad Syafrin[29], who began attending Sylado's performances as a middle schooler, called him "the first historical hero of our generation." Although Syafrin never performed on stage, he eagerly worked behind the scenes, assisting with production. Sylado's productions were further enriched by contributions from a growing community of young artists.

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28) Jenny Suharto (currently known as Jenny Huis). **[photo 13]**

29) Muhammad Shafrin Zaini. **[photo 14]**

photo 14
© Muhammad Syafrin

Live music was provided by the up-and-coming rock band Shark Move, led by Benny Soebardja, while stage design was crafted by young painter Jeihan. Emerging artists from various disciplines in Bandung lent their talents freely, drawn to Sylado's vision. In tribute to Sylado's Puisi Mbeling ("Rebellious Poetry") movement, they came to be known as the Kaum Mbeling ("The Rebellious Crowd").

"God the Father" and Its Subversion

Sylado's rebellion extended beyond the authoritarianism of the parental generation to challenge established notions of "God the Father." In 1971, he staged Messia II, a provocative play featuring a dark-skinned, Afro-haired Christ draped in a colorful poncho. This Christ moved through a surreal narrative, crossing paths with historical and cultural figures such as Joan of Arc, Jimi Hendrix, and Marilyn Monroe. Benny Ditus, a regular collaborator, played the unconventional Jesus. The performance opened with the hippie-style Christ sensually swaying his hips as he declared, "I intercourse with the wind."

photo 15
A scene from *Messiah II* ©Jan Hartland

The choice of Gedung Merdeka—a revered venue where the Bandung Conference had been held—to stage this irreverent production drew sharp criticism from the clergy and the older generation[30)]. Yet this was only the beginning. Over the course of the 1970s, Sylado produced a series of scandalous works, including Genesis II,

30) [photo 15]

Testament II, Apocalypse II, and Exodus II, each titled after a book of the Bible. These productions broke every taboo imaginable, such as one infamous scene where a female audience member, overtaken by fervor, was pulled on stage and stripped of her clothing[31]. Such incidents routinely led to Sylado being summoned by the authorities, but he seemed to embrace the notoriety.

In Exodus II, a climactic moment featured Jan Hartland as Christ sharing an impassioned kiss with Marilyn Monroe, portrayed by Jais Hadiana[32]. Cast as a novice actress, Jais faced widespread backlash, while tabloids relished rumors of her relationship with Sylado. However, these controversies were no accident — they were deliberately orchestrated by Sylado, who saw scandal as a medium of expression as powerful as the stage itself.

Through these absurdist dramas, Sylado systematically dismantled Christian orthodoxy and the sanctified image of Jesus. He hurled invective at clergy, shattered sacred taboos, and inverted moral binaries: the holy became vulgar; light turned to darkness; good became evil, and vice versa. Like a photographic negative flipping to positive, Sylado disrupted these established dualities, creating chaos that pulsed with raw energy and fervent engagement.

photo 16
Jais Hadiana *©Pos Film*

This spirit of inversion was visually symbolized in Sylado's frequent use of stark black-and-white contrasts in his stage designs and costumes — a motif that eventually became his signature aesthetic.

The interplay of contradictions and reversals became the essence of Sylado's charisma. His scandalous provocations — whether on stage or in print — elicited

31) *Aktuil* No. 99, 1970.

32) [photo 16]

photo 17
Sylad on the stage ©Boy Worang

hysterical reactions from parents, teachers, and clergy. When confronted with criticism, however, Sylado revealed a striking duality. The same man who had reveled in vulgarity would suddenly wield his encyclopedic knowledge, eloquently defending his work with theological and Biblical expertise.

Sylado was a trickster, adept at traversing the boundaries between opposites. His audacity resonated deeply with young audiences, who found exhilaration and empowerment in his fearless dismantling of authority and tradition.

The Priest, Brouwer

While some contemporaries regarded Sylado's performances as avant-garde, influenced by the French existential absurdist theater of the time, the dominant view within Indonesia's theater community was far less flattering. His works were often dismissed as sensationalist and gimmicky, emphasizing shock value over artistic merit. Yet, among those intrigued by Sylado's productions was a remarkable figure: M.A.W. Brouwer, a Dutch Catholic priest[33]. Father Brouwer served as pastor at Bandung's cathedral and was a celebrated columnist for national publications such as Kompas. He also lectured in psychology at some local universities and was a trusted counselor, particularly focused on family and youth issues. A cultural icon in Bandung, Brouwer's legacy endures to this day;

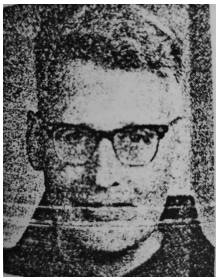

photo 18
Father Brouwer ©*kompas*

33) M. A. W. Brouwer (1923-1991) was born in Delft, Netherlands. As a missionary of the Franciscan order, he first came to Indonesia in 1950 and later majored in psychology at the University of Indonesia. From 1963, he served as a priest at the cathedral in Bandung and also taught at several universities. In 1988, he returned to the Netherlands for medical treatment (Sidharta 1994). **[photo 18]**

a monument on Asia-Africa Street bears inscriptions commemorating his deep love for West Java more than three decades after his death[34].

A passionate theater enthusiast, Brouwer famously referred to Sylado as the "Hottest Man in Town.[35]" After each performance, Brouwer would pen a review, which inevitably appeared in one newspaper or another. However, his critiques were often laced with his trademark humor and wit. For example:

"This kind of play was already being performed in Chelsea in 1952," or, "A demonstration of sexual intercourse might have seemed provocative in a village school in Giethoorn, but in Bandung, it feels silly."[36]

Brouwer's insight went beyond surface commentary. He observed that while Sylado's performances embodied the rebellious spirit of counterculture, they lacked the overt anti-military or anti-regime messaging seen in youth movements elsewhere, such as in Czechoslovakia. Instead, Sylado's sharpest barbs were directed at the hypocrisies and moral failures of the parental generation. Brouwer eloquently remarked:

"Remy is a troublemaker, in the tradition of Voltaire and Pasternak. He is driven by an insatiable need to see the world for himself. Mischief-makers like Erasmus, Martin Luther, Calvin, and William Ochman challenged the status quo, liberating Europe from religious oppression and paving the way for transformative reforms centuries later."[37]

photo 19
A monument inscribed with the words of M. A. W. Brouwer: *God created the land of Parahyangan while smiling.* ©photo by the author

Sylado, for his part, revered Brouwer. He valued the priest's thoughtful, and at times brutally candid, appraisals of his work.

34) **[photo 19]**
35) *Indonesia Times*, October 1, 1977.
36) *Kompas*, May 18, 1972.
37) *ibid*.

Before every performance, Sylado would peer from backstage to ensure Brouwer was in the audience before the curtain rose.

Yet, for all his admiration, Sylado avoided meeting Brouwer in person. Despite sharing the same city, Sylado went to great lengths to evade any direct encounters with the priest. If he spotted Brouwer in public, he would hurriedly retreat or hide. This peculiar behavior stood in stark contrast to Sylado's otherwise unflinching confrontations with authority figures, including clergy and societal elites.

What explains this almost childlike and puzzling behavior toward Brouwer—the very antithesis of Sylado's fearless provocations against clergy and establishment figures? Exploring this anomaly may provide a key to understanding the private life Sylado kept so carefully hidden and the inner workings of his complex psyche.

Sylado's Early Life and the Concept of "Fatherhood"

Remy Sylado was born in 1945 in Makassar, South Sulawesi, to parents of Minahasan descent from North Sulawesi. He was the youngest of three children, with two elder sisters. His father, Yohannes H. Tambayong, was a Protestant pastor and a scholar of remarkable intellect. Yohannes's father, Sylado's grandfather, had served as an indigenous soldier trained under Dutch military education[38]. Educated at an American Alliance Church seminary, Yohannes was fluent in Dutch and English, known for his extensive personal library and insatiable love of reading.

In the 1930s, Yohannes was a key figure in the church-building movement in Minahasa, which advocated for independence from Dutch colonial rule. He worked alongside prominent leaders such as Sam Ratulangi, who would later become Sulawesi's first governor. Yohannes also contributed to theological

38) In 2014, Sylado published a novel titled *Malaekat di Lereng Tidar (Angel on the Slopes of Tidar)*, which is based on his grandfather, Jezekiel Tambayong, a native mercenary known as Marsose in the Dutch colonial army.

publications such as *Kalam Hidup*, widely circulated in eastern Indonesia[39]. According to Sylado's sister Yenny, Yohannes's commitment to regional development and education was so impactful that many residents in the North Sulawesi villages he served became fluent in Dutch and English.

photo 20
Young Sylado (center) with his mother (second from the left) and his two sisters (left and right).
©Eleonora Moniung

Yohannes met Sylado's mother, Juliana Panda, in the remote village of Maliku. Juliana, the daughter of a poor farmer, later moved with Yohannes to Makassar. Tragically, Yohannes passed away shortly after Sylado's birth, leaving Juliana to raise their three children alone.

Following her husband's death, Juliana relocated with her children to Semarang, Central Java, where she worked as a live-in domestic helper at a newly established Baptist seminary. Sylado grew up in this seminary, living with his mother and sisters until he completed high school. Like his father's alma mater, the American-affiliated seminary steeped him in Western norms, culture, and knowledge. Yet, the family's position as subaltern dependents within this rigid, hierarchical environment exposed them to prejudice and mistreatment.

Some pastors were particularly harsh toward Juliana, belittling her lack of education in stark contrast to her late husband's erudition. One incident seared itself into young Sylado's memory: a pastor mocked the porridge Juliana had prepared for the students, calling it "cat vomit" before throwing it on the floor and forcing her to clean up the mess. Isolated on the hilltop seminary, where friends and leisure were scarce, Sylado sought solace by sneaking into the library to read voraciously, only to face reprimands and expulsion when caught. On one occasion, a pigeon coop he had lovingly built was destroyed, and the newly hatched chicks were discarded.

39) Sylado 2002, p. 280.

These formative experiences as the son of a subaltern worker in an elitist and hierarchical environment profoundly shaped Sylado's consciousness. Rarely shared outside his immediate circle, these struggles were nonetheless foundational to his worldview. The traumatic realities of his upbringing left an indelible mark, particularly in shaping his complex relationship with the concept of "Fatherhood"—both divine and human.

This duality—resentment toward institutionalized "Fatherhood" and a profound yearning for the idealized image of his late father—deepened Sylado's inner contradictions. It fueled his rebellion against conventional religious imagery and narratives while simultaneously intensifying his admiration for his father, a pastor respected for his intellect and writing. These conflicting emotions forged the roots of Sylado's provocative style, his relentless questioning of authority, and the dialectical worldview that would define his work.

photo 21
The American Baptist Church Seminary in Semarang, where Sylado spent his childhood. ©photo by the author

photo 22
The seminary library that young Sylado often sneaked into is now used as a meeting room. ©photo by the author

When viewed through the lens of Sylado's struggle between defiance and longing toward the "paternal," how might Father Brouwer—a figure who, like Sylado's late father, embodied both a clergyman's role and a writer's commitment to social good—have appeared to him? Brouwer's gaze, marked by understanding and interest, occasionally tinged with sharp critique yet fundamentally warm, seemed to inspire pride and joy in Sylado. Yet, Sylado could never meet that gaze, instead choosing to evade it entirely. Could this reflect that Sylado, in reality, never seized the moment of growth that could only

come from confronting and resolving the deep inner turmoil evoked by the "paternal"?

To Jakarta

As the 1970s drew to a close, Sylado's time in Bandung came to an end. In 1978, *Aktuil* effectively ceased publication when its publishing rights were transferred to journalist Sondang Napitpulu, who launched a Jakarta-based news magazine under the same name. Although Sylado had left *Aktuil* in 1975, he contributed an exposé to the Jakarta edition, revealing corruption involving West Java's vice governor in land ownership. This article resulted in a defamation lawsuit against him. While Sylado stood firm in his defense, Sondang publicly apologized, and Sylado was ultimately convicted[40]. This incident led to Sylado losing all his platforms in Bandung, which compelled him to relocate to Jakarta in 1980.

In Jakarta, Sylado continued his theatrical work under the name Dapur Teater. However, the group had shifted from its earlier focus on young amateurs to a more professional ensemble of seasoned actors. Boy Worang, his steadfast collaborator, commuted from Bandung for each production. Even after beginning a banking career, Worang maintained his commitment to theater, initially hiding his iconic long hair under a short-haired wig—though by then, he had cut it off entirely.

In Jakarta, Sylado also ventured into television and film—industries he had previously disdained. The capital was experiencing a media boom, fueled by Soeharto's development- driven policies, which also invigorated the entertainment industry. Artists discovered by Sylado during his Aktuil years, such as singers Ermy Kulit[41] and Doel

40) *Aktuil* September 14, 1981.

41) Ermy Kulit, jazz singer. As a teenager singing at a church in Manado, North Sumatra, she was discovered by Sylado, who recognized her talent during his visit to the area as a writer for AKTUIL magazine. This encounter provided her with the opportunity to make her professional debut. She continues to thrive as one of Indonesia's leading female singers. **[photo 23]**

photo 23
Elmy Kulit ©photo by the author

photo 24
Doel Sumbang ©photo by the author

photo 25
Yudhistira ANM Massardi ©photo by the author

photo 26
Seno Gumira Adjidarma ©photo by the author

Sumbang[42], were flourishing in the mainstream. Writers who had emerged through Sylado's Puisi Mbeling column, such as Yudhistira ANM Massardi[43] and Seno Gumira Adjidarma[44], were establishing themselves as prominent voices in literature and journalism.

Meanwhile, musicians who had performed live for his productions, such as Benny Soebardja[45],

42) Doel Sumbang, a singer and songwriter with a charismatic appeal that transcends generations. In the late 1970s, he met Sylado through theatrical activities, where Sylado recognized his talent for composition and singing. This led to his debut as a singer, beginning with the creation of theme songs for stage performances. He remains active to this day. **[photo 24]**

43) Yudhitira ANM Massardi, a novelist and poet who worked alongside his twin brother, Noorca Massardi. After serving as the editor-in-chief of the magazine *GATRA*, he became involved in establishing and running initiatives for underprivileged children.He lost his father during the anti-communist purges following the September 30th Movement. Subsequently, he and his brother lived on the streets, delivering newspapers to make a living. During this time, he submitted a poem titled *The Rebellious Spirit* to *Aktuil*, which caught Sylado's attention. From then on, Sylado became his mentor. Yudhitira later remarked that Sylado was "the one and only teacher" he had during that difficult period. **[photo 25]**

44) Seno Gumira Adjidarma, a novelist and journalist. He founded entertainment magazines such as *JAKARTA-JAKARTA* and also served as a faculty member and rector at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts. He credits Sylado with teaching him the principle that "Art doesn't have to be noble, but it must be mind-blowing." **[photo 26]**

45) Benny Soebardja, a musician and singer. Soebardja formed the rock band *The Peels* in the late 1960s while still in high school, performing both domestically and internationally. He later debuted as a vocalist and led legendary bands such as *Shake Move* and *The Giant Step*. Subsequently, he continued to front iconic bands such as *Shake Move* and *Giant Step*. Today, he remains an active and charismatic figure in Indonesian progressive rock, thriving in his solo career. **[photo 27]**

had become celebrated rock artists, achieving both national and international acclaim. Jeihan[46], who had contributed stage designs for Sylado's plays, had grown into a globally renowned painter, thanks in part to the support of Jais Hadiana (Darga), who had once played Marilyn Monroe in Sylado's productions. Jais herself had become a successful art dealer and one of Southeast Asia's first prominent female gallery owners[47].

photo 27
Benny Soebardja ©photo by the author

By contrast, connections with figures such as Juju Romila and Benny Ditus had faded into obscurity. However, Tatang—a boy whom Sylado had once mentored—graduated from the Bandung Institute of Technology's School of Visual Arts and pursued a career as a graphic designer. Though Sylado had encouraged him to become a writer and even provided personal guidance on his work, Tatang ultimately chose a different path.

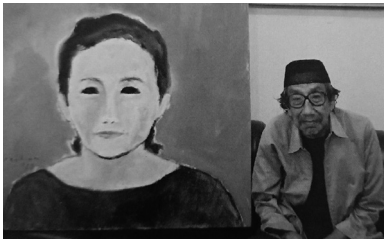

photo 28
Jeihan Sukmantoro (1938–2019) ©Peter Basuki

By the 1980s, the once-rebellious youth of 1970s Bandung had matured and moved on, leaving behind the fervent days of their youthful revolution.

photo 29
Jais Darga (Hadiana) ©photo by the author

46) Jeihan Sukmantoro (1938–2019), a painter, was born in Central Java. He studied at the Faculty of Art at Bandung Institute of Technology. Known for his distinctive portrayal of figures with eyes painted in solid black, he gained international recognition as an Impressionist artist. **[photo 28]**

47) Jais Darga has been active as the first female art dealer in Southeast Asia. Her biography, *Jais Darga Namaku* (I am Jais Darga), published in 2018, became a bestseller. The film based on this work, *Before, Now, and Then* (directed by Kamila Andini, 2022), was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, and supporting actress Laula Basuki won the Silver Bear. **[photo 29]**

photo 30

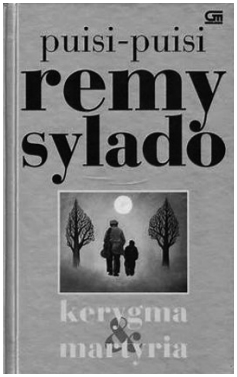

photo 31

"A Declaration of Maturity"

By the 1990s, Sylado had firmly cemented his position within Jakarta's media landscape, becoming a mentor figure to many he had once inspired. As Indonesia entered an era marked by the emergence of private television networks, Sylado's presence on TV increased. At the same time, he maintained a prolific output of essays and serialized novels across various publications, many of which were later compiled into books by major publishers. These works—predominantly sweeping historical epics and biographies—were distinguished by their sheer heft, dominating bookstore shelves. This image, rows of voluminous volumes bearing his name, perfectly captured the image of his nickname, "The Walking Encyclopedia[48]." As a writer, Sylado had successfully transitioned from a creator of popular youth-oriented fiction to a venerable literary heavyweight.

In 2004, Sylado revisited his past by publishing *Puisi Mbeling*, a collection of his rebellious free-verse poetry from his Aktuil magazine days[49]. Alongside this, he released *Kerigma & Martirya*, a self-curated anthology of 900 poems written since his youth[50]. *Puisi Mbeling*, with its vivid, pop-inspired design, encapsulated the colorful and subversive spirit of 1970s Bandung. In stark contrast, *Kerigma & Martirya* was a serious and contemplative work, delving into themes of solitude, hope, and divinity. This imposing 1,056-page hardcover volume featured Sylado's own color illustrations, including a cover painting depicting two figures—an adult and a child—walking along a dimly lit path. In many ways, this anthology seemed to invert the psychedelic

48) In a 1999 column, the *Jakarta Post* gave this designation to Sylado. Since then, this designation has been repeatedly used in reference to him.

49) Sylado 2004a. **[photo 30]**

50) Sylado 2004b. **[photo 31]**

exuberance of *Puisi Mbeling*, offering instead a profound and introspective counterpoint.

In the afterword of *Kerigma and Martirya*, Sylado reflected on his rebellious expressions and actions of the 1970s, admitting he had been "naked" in those years. Now, he declared, he had "clothed himself (with the garments of wisdom and discretion)[51]," signaling a conscious embrace of maturity.

photo 32
Emmy Maria Louise Tambayong
©photo by the author

This "declaration of maturity" was underscored by the accolades that followed. In 2005, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono bestowed upon Sylado a cultural merit award. He went on to receive numerous literary honors, including Indonesia's prestigious Khatulistiwa Literary Award, further solidifying his status as a "Maestro." By the time he reached his 60s, Sylado had completed his transformation—from a magnetic figure of youthful rebellion into a respected and enduring literary elder statesman.

Emmy's Perspective

However, the narratives of those who knew Sylado intimately reveal a side of him starkly different from the story of maturity he presented about himself and the media's glowing accounts.

Emmy Louise Tambayong, Sylado's wife since 1976, offers a rare and personal perspective on his life[52]. Unlike many prominent Indonesian figures, details of their marriage were almost entirely absent from public discourse during Sylado's lifetime. Emmy, born into a Dutch-Eurasian Catholic family in Semarang—the same city where Sylado had spent

51) *ibid*, p. 1046. This statement appears to be based on Genesis 2: 25 ("At that time, the man and his wife were naked, but they were not ashamed") and 3: 21 ("And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them").

52) [photo 32]

photo 33
A wedding photo of Sylado and Emmy.
©Emmy Maria Louise Tambayong

part of his youth—abandoned her career as a pharmacist upon their marriage to support his artistic endeavors. Her unpaid contributions ranged from crafting costumes and preparing meals for theater members to choreographing dances and translating Dutch texts. Without her behind-the-scenes dedication, many of Sylado's productions would not have come to fruition.

Their wedding, held in a Catholic church in Semarang, reflected Sylado's eccentricity. He wore a white morning coat, while Emmy donned a black dress—a symbolic inversion of traditional wedding attire[53]. This unconventional choice embodied Sylado's unique flair, but Emmy's family saw it as an ill omen. Tragically, their apprehensions proved accurate, as Sylado's behavior toward Emmy was fraught with issues from the outset.

Sylado frequently erupted in fits of rage over trivial matters, often resorting to physical violence against Emmy. His financial irresponsibility compounded their struggles, as he poured most of their income into his theatrical pursuits. When Emmy attempted to return to her career as a pharmacist to support their household, Sylado reacted with fury and violence. Alarmed, Emmy's father presented Sylado with a divorce permit obtained from the priest who had officiated their marriage. In response, Sylado inexplicably tore it apart, along with their sacramental marriage certificate. Yet Emmy, undeterred, carefully retrieved and painstakingly pieced the fragments of the marriage certificate back together.

Though the physical violence eventually ceased, Sylado's infidelity persisted, continuing unabated until his later years when illness confined him to bed.

Despite his treatment of Emmy, Sylado deeply revered his mother, who

53) [photo 33]

had raised him as a single parent. Shortly after his marriage, he brought her to live with him and Emmy in Bandung. Yet his ongoing mistreatment of his wife revealed a stark lack of emotional growth, underscoring his inability to build or sustain a healthy partnership with the person closest to him.

This personal immaturity sharply contrasted with the figure of the exacting artist who demanded unwavering discipline and responsibility from his performers. Sylado's dual nature—on one hand, the rigorous theater director who approached the stage with uncompromising professionalism, and on the other, the emotionally stunted individual—painted a portrait of a man deeply at odds with himself.

Sylado on His Deathbed

By October 2020, Sylado was on the brink of death. For the preceding eight years, he had been absent from his Jakarta home, living with another woman. After suffering a stroke, he was abandoned and left entirely alone. His life was saved only through a miraculous, last-minute intervention when he was discovered in critical condition.

Following this near-death experience, Sylado returned to his home for the first time in nearly a decade. Bedridden, he was cared for by his wife, Emmy, who, despite years of estrangement and inner turmoil, chose to take him back. Over the next two years, Sylado survived several brushes with death, sustained by Emmy's tireless devotion.

During this time, Sylado's mind was often clouded, and he would occasionally erupt in unexplained fits of rage. Yet, to Emmy's astonishment, he began expressing sentiments he had never voiced before: gratitude for her care. He repeatedly expressed remorse for the pain he had caused her and sought solace in prayer with a fervor that was entirely new to him.

However, illness was not the only burden the couple faced. They were also confronted with severe financial hardships. As smartphones gained rapid

popularity in Indonesia during the mid-2010s, sales of Sylado's many works declined precipitously. His contracts with major publishers were terminated, and royalty payments dwindled to a fraction of what they had once been. Coupled with the ongoing financial losses from his theatrical endeavors, their savings were long depleted. Without children to rely on, they could not afford even basic medical care and struggled daily to make ends meet.

Their survival was largely dependent on the generosity of prominent figures who had known Sylado in the past[54]. The man once celebrated as the "walking encyclopedia" now faced the cruel irony of living in a world where digital media, which had eroded the value of his encyclopedic knowledge and literary contributions, had also upended his livelihood[55].

The "Brouwer" of Semarang

During his extended illness, Sylado began to share with Emmy the outline of a new story he had envisioned. It was inspired by a real-life Dutch vagabond who had lived in Semarang during the mid-1950s. This man's life had unraveled during the Japanese occupation, when he was detained along with other Dutch nationals. After being forced to witness the brutal assault of his wife by Japanese soldiers, the man succumbed to a mental breakdown. He eventually became a vagrant and met a tragic end, dying after being struck by a pedicab. Inexplicably, the people of Semarang referred to him as "Brouwer."

Brouwer was often seen begging along a riverside road that connected the former headquarters of the military police with the middle school Sylado had attended. His route extended toward the eastern residential

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54) In April 2002, a charity event for Sylado was held at the Taman Ismail Marzuki cultural center in Jakarta.

55) The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* completely ceased its print editions after the 15th edition, which was finalized in 2010, and has since transitioned to an online version.

district where Emmy's family home was located. As they reflected on this figure from their shared past, Sylado expressed a desire to write about him. Preferring a typewriter over a computer, Sylado dictated his ideas to Emmy, who transcribed his words[56].

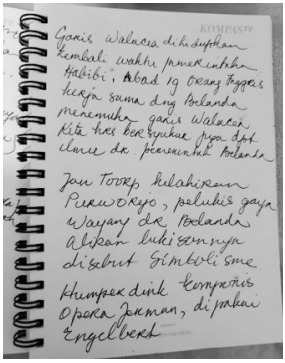

photo 34
The dictation of Sylado's tale transcribed by Emmy.
©photo by the author

However, Sylado passed away before completing the story. The notes he left behind are fragmented, lacking both narrative coherence and an outline, leaving the full scope of his vision unclear. What survives is not so much about Brouwer himself but rather about a pastor in Makassar, South Sulawesi, who was accused of espionage by the Japanese military, forcibly removed from his home, and tortured. These descriptions align with Sylado's accounts of his late father, Yohannes Hendrik Tambayong[57].

In his final days, Sylado reportedly experienced visions of a man accompanied by a small child. He would often ask, "Who are they?" He described the man riding a bicycle, surrounded by flocks of pigeons. Family members speculate that these figures represented his late father and an elder brother who had died in infancy before Sylado was born[58].

photo 35
Sylado and his older sister, Johanna. This photo was taken in 2022, after his surgery. © Eleonora Moniung

The intended connection between the figure of his father and the Dutch vagabond Brouwer remains unknown. Yet, in the final chapter of his life, Sylado was finally confronting his conception of "Fatherhood"—as represented by both his earthly father and by God.

In these moments, Sylado may have come to terms with his vulnerabilities and lifelong internal contradictions.

56) [photo 34]

57) Sylado, *op.cit*, p. 280.

58) [photo 36]

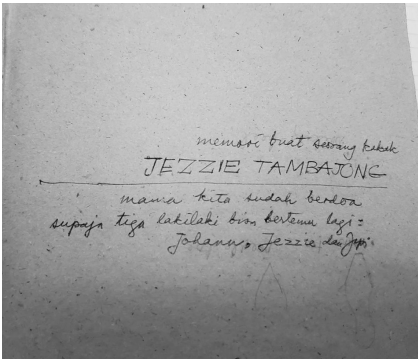

photo 36
A scribble left on the edge of Sylado's creative notebook from the 1960s. "A memoir for my late brother, Jezzie Tambayong: Mother prayed for us. Yohannes, Jezzie, Yapi — three men, hoping we would meet again someday." (Yohannes and Jezzie are the names of Sylado's late father and brother.) ©photo by the author

The young Sylado, growing up as the fatherless son of a servant in a rigid and elitist seminary, and Brouwer, a man who fell from the colonial elite to a life of destitution, shared an unspoken resonance. Both lived within a world shaped by clashing values in the same city. However, their connection went deeper. Though their circumstances diverged dramatically, both bore the scars of profound conflict centered around their partners.

As Sylado faced his reckoning with "Fatherhood"[59] at the end of his life, he may have felt an acute, unfulfilled desire to reconcile the contradictions that had defined him. Chief among them was likely an unachievable atonement toward Emmy, the wife he had hurt so deeply. In Brouwer — the man who had been powerless to protect his wife — Sylado may have glimpsed a reflection of himself.

In Conclusion: The Two "Brouwers"

In the cities of Bandung and Semarang, two "Brouwers" crossed paths with Sylado without ever truly confronting him. These figures seem to embody the "paternal archetype" — a presence Sylado postponed facing until his final days — and the unresolved inner conflicts it represented.

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59) Jais Darga recounts her debate with Sylado in the 70's about the concept of "God the Father." When a young Jais asked why God had to be "Father," Sylado answered,"Because He is a figure of intimacy and affection." Jais responded, "Then why not 'God the grandmother'?" This provoked a huge angry outburst from Sylado, who exclaimed, "Never say such a thing again!" However, Jais never received an answer as to why "God the grandmother" was unacceptable. This episode is intriguing, as it highlights sylado's idealization of "the Father" while also hinting at the patriarchal values and misogynistic tendencies often noted in his worldview and writings.

When we once again turn our gaze to Sylado and the stage of 1970s Bandung, his light and shadow come into sharp focus. On stage, he ceaselessly constructed fictional confrontations with the "paternal archetype," striving to transcend it and carve out a vision of himself beyond its hold. The deeper the shadow, the more dazzling the light, and in the fleeting moment when that brilliance reverses, the stage transforms into a realm of boundless celebration, igniting with otherworldly radiance.

photo 37
Former members of Dapur Teater share their individual memories of their mentor, Remy Sylado (From right to left: Yoseph Al Pradja, Agus Sutanto, Yanov Ukur, Teha Sugiyo Boy Worang).
©photo by the author

In the Northern Hemisphere, where counterculture movements—fueled by television and satellite communications—amplified the doubts and anger of a disillusioned youth, Bandung's young people joined the wave. They grew their hair long, diving headfirst into the cultural maelstrom, relying solely on youth magazines to guide them. In their search for meaning outside the norms, society, and history dictated by their parents' generation, Sylado stood as a beacon. He launched his solitary soul and body as a medium, reflecting the youth's collective anxiety, stagnation, frustration, and rage, then inverting these emotions into a spectacular "firework," drawing them into a once-in-a-lifetime frenzy of celebration.

The days when Sylado's voluminous works—earning him the titles of "Maestro" and "Walking Encyclopedia"—dominated bookstore shelves have long since passed. Encyclopedias and bookstores themselves have been replaced by the virtual landscapes of the internet. Even within these digital archives, no record remains of Sylado's 1970s performances. However, Yoseph Al Pradja[60)], who once performed on the Sylado's stage in Bandung and has since led a theater troupe in Garut, West Java, guiding them to multiple

60) [photo 37]

photo 38
Tatang Ramadhan Bouqie (The Little Tatang) : Currently, he, together with his wife Jeanelle and his son Gibran, is actively engaged in painting and sculpture, and has successfully ventured into performance art, *Sirkus Demit*.
©Tatang Ramadhan Bouqie

photo 39
Currently, Boy Worang is dedicated to regional revitalization efforts in a remote village on the eastern edge of Bandung. As part of his personal development, he also teaches theater to local children. ©photo by the author

contests victories, still remembers his interactions with Sylado from that time. When asked what was most essential to the stage, Sylado replied, "Hope."

Sylado, and many of the young people who once shared the stage with him, have since departed this world. In an era where digital penetration has dissolved the boundaries of time and space, blurred the everyday and extraordinary, and fragmented the concept of history itself, the kind of celebration that once spurred young people to leap beyond historical confines may no longer be possible. Even so—perhaps precisely because of this—the "memory of the fireworks" remains vivid within those once-young hearts, unextinguished. In the light of those who continue to burn themselves away, Sylado lives on.

I respectfully dedicate this work to the memory of:

• Remy Sylado (1945–2022)

- Johanna Sophie Tambayong (1934–2024)
- Yenny Taksha Tambayong (1936–2024)
- Odang Danaatmadja (1950–2024)
- Yudhistira ANM Massardi (1954–2024)

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Physical Expression in the Post-Online Era: Case Study of Execution of IDF since 2020 to 2024

Madoka FUKUOKA

This chapter focuses on the physical expression in the Post-Online Era. Through the examination of the Indonesian Dance Festival (IDF)'s online event in 2020 and the subsequent online and in-person presentations of works and discussion, the chapter considers the possibility of the unique execution of a dance festival utilizing the online platform where diverse perspectives towards the human body can be seen.

1. Dawn of Contemporary Dance in Indonesia and the Start of the Indonesian Dance Festival (IDF)

The term "contemporary" was first introduced to the Indonesian dance scene in the 1950s. The term was proposed by leading dancers who had studied modern dance in the States and returned to their home countries. Eko Supriyanto describes the history of contemporary dance in Indonesia referring to Sal Murgiyanto's opinion (Supriyanto 2018: 92-106). As the pioneers of modern dance, Seti-Arti Kailola, Bagong Kussudiardjo, and Wisnu Wardana had been influenced by American modern dancer Martha Graham and had the opportunities to study in the Graham school in New York. After returning from the U.S. in 1958, each of them began to engage in educational and creative activities in different ways[1)]. They used modern dance techniques

1) After returning from the U.S., Seti-Arti teached in her dance school named as "Sutalagati" that produced many students. Bagong opened his studio named as "Pusat Latihan Tari (PLT) Bagong Kussudiardjo," that has had a profound influence on many younger artists. Wisnoe Wardana opened "Contemporary Dance School Wisnoe Wardana," and focused on the educational activities. Although the term was not widely used at that time, this is thought to have been the first dance studio to use the term "contemporary" ("kontemporer" in Indonesian language).

The description in this section was also written with reference to the following literature: Contemporary Dance in Indonesia In Edi Sedyawati ed. 1998 *Performing Arts. The 8th volume of Indonesian Heritage*. Archipelago Press, pp.110-119. The author of this section is not specified, but is presumably Sal Murgiyanto.

to create their own unique forms of expression, which may have had elements of today's contemporary dance, although the term "contemporary" or "kontemporer" itself was not very popular and sometimes the term "modern" or "*kreasi baru* (new creation)" or "*karya tari baru*"(new dance work)were used during this period (Supriyanto 2018: 94).

The term "contemporary" gradually spread after the establishment of the Jakarta Art Center (TIM Taman Ismail Marzuki)(1968), and the creative performance experiments began there[2)].

Kusumastuti pointed out in her dissertation that the establishment of the Jakarta Art Center (TIM) and setting up the dance department in DKJ (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta) were the prominent elements to produce the relationships between culture, politics, audience, and media (Kusumastuti 2016). As pointed out by Kusumastuti, the relationship between these four stakeholders has been continued until today and the ecosystem of contemporary dance has been constructed. The practice of contemporary dance in Jakarta has been the central ecosystem for various experimental activities in Indonesian dance adapting many attempts and many disputes both domestic and international.

Examining three eras of the Indonesian contemporary dance scene, Raditya considered the characteristics of each. He positioned the first era (1968-1990) as the era of "reinterpretation of tradition." As the representative dancer, he mentioned the name of Sardono W. Kusumo(Raditya 2021: 105-114). The activities of Sardono were also considered by Supriyanto, Kusumastuti, and Murgiyanto (Supriyanto 2018, Kusumastuti 2016, Murgiyanto 1995).

Sardono W. Kusumo learned modern dance in the States in 1964, then he became the leading dancer in the Indonesian contemporary dance

2) In November 2023, this author had the opportunity to see an exhibition in Yogyakarta on the activities of Wisnoe Wardana, held by the new dance organization in Yogyakarta named "Arsip Tari." Wardana created many works, including the work titled as "*Manusia dan Kursi* (Human and Chair)," and one of his disciples reenacted the performance of the piece.

scene. In 1978, Sal Murgiyanto had the initiative to execute the Young Choreographers' Festival and Sardono was one of the reviewers in the event. Dancers who participated were, Ben Suharto (Yogya), Wayan Dibia (Bali), Wiwik Sipala (Makassar), Tasman and Suprapto (Solo) and Endo Suanda (Bandung)[3]. Each of these participants has been leading dancers in Indonesian dance world. This shows the importance of the festival. The Young Choreographers' Festival had continued since 1978 to 1984 (Supriyanto 2018: 113). The Indonesian Dance Festival began as the successor of the Young Choreographers' Festival in 1992[4]. According to the exhibition in IDF2022, the Young Choreographers' Festival was reenacted in IDF1994, and many young dancers from the various regions both domestic and international participated (Vasana Tari Archive Exhibition at S. Sudjojono Gallery, TIM October 2022).

After the above mentioned process, IDF began in 1992 and has gained international attention as the largest contemporary dance event in Indonesia and also in Southeast Asia. It features performances by a diverse range of artists. It is also characterized by the participation of many curators both domestic and from abroad, including specialists in theater and visual arts, regardless of genre boundaries.

In the exhibition of 2022, there was the following description.

> "The term "curator" was introduced to IDF in 2014, where Helly Minarti, Tang Fu Kuen, and Daisuke Muto took on the role of artistic curators. However, this does not mean that there were no curatorial practices in IDF events before then. In previous periods,

3) Online communication with Endo Suanda and Marjorie Suanda on 26 January, 2025.

4) While considering Sardono's acitivity, Eko Supriyanto did the intensive consideration on 5 leading dancers in 1990-2008, including Martinus Miroto, Mugiyono Kasido, Hartati, Jecko Siompo, and Eko Supriyanto himself (Supriyanto 2018: 133-192).

Raditya also positioned the second age of contemporary dance (1990-2010) as the age of expansion of contemporary. He also mentioned many dancers from various regions such as Hartati, Mugiyono Kasido, Martinus Miroto, Eko Supriyanto, Jecko Siompo. As the characteristics of the third age (2010-2020), he pointed out the development of discourses, profound research, and creative exploration (Raditya 2021: 105-114).

> the editors and translators of the IDF's artistic vision were framed in roles such as head of the program department, program section, and artistic council. Through various perspectives and practices, dozens of these registered names have contributed and helped in building an artistic vision for IDF"(Vasana Tari Archive Exhibition at S. Sudjojono Gallery, TIM, October 2022).

According to this statement, based on the accumulation of the program by various stakeholders, the role known as "curator" had been set, and IDF had constructed a more international system of dance festival since 2014.

The 1996 edition of IDF began with the signing of a joint agreement between the Jakarta Arts Institute (IKJ), the Jakarta Arts Council (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta), the Jakarta Arts Foundation (Yayasan Kesenian Jakarta), the Jakarta Arts Center-Taman Ismail Marzuki, and the Jakarta Arts Center-Gedung Kesenian Jakarta (Vasana Tari Archive Exhibition at S. Sudjojono Gallery, TIM, October 2022).

Currently, the staff members are composed mostly of women, and as an organization led by women, it is building an ecosystem of dialogue on various social issues through physical expression. The festival celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2022 as a leading festival that most prominently displayed trends in contemporary dance in Southeast Asia, and the exhibition presented the history of the festival since its founding.

2. The Development of Visual Media and the Influences of Online Distribution Platform

In the history of media development, various kinds of visual media have become widespread and the performing art forms have been transmitted and disseminated through them. Audio media saw the development of recording technology from the early 20th century, with distribution through

LP records and radio, and cassette tapes became very popular in the 1970s. In contrast, the development of visual media began with the advent of television, although there was the film industry before that, but dance and theater were not widely disseminated to the society. Since the end of the 1970s to 1980s, various performing art forms such as dance, theater, and puppet plays have been disseminated through the television. Videotapes such as VHS or Beta have also been used to record and preserve the performances in this era.

However, even in this period, visual media were still not as widespread as audio media. For example, in the case of the dance named *jaipongan*, which was very popular in West Java and other region in Indonesia from the late 1970s to the 1980s, the music was spread mainly through the cassette tapes, and the original dance choreography created by *JUGALA* was not properly conveyed, resulting in the rampant use of many incorrect choreographies. Gugum Gumbira, the founder of *JUGALA* group, was so saddened by this situation that he stopped creating new pieces for a while. It is considered as one example that indicates the difficulty of the dissemination of dance choreography while musical sounds were disseminated widely.

In Southeast Asia, the visual media that brought the most significant change was VCDs. Since the 1990s, discs known as VCD (video CD) became widespread in Southeast Asia. VCDs did not require a dedicated player and could be viewed on a computer, so they became popular throughout Southeast Asia, and many audio and video streams were disseminated through VCDs. The original dancing of Indonesian famous *dangdut* singer and dancer Inul Daratista was also spread by VCDs.

DVDs and CDs also were disseminated, but not for very long periods of time, then the era shifted to the streaming era after the 2000s. With the shift to the streaming era, around the 2010s, these discs fell out of use and distribution platforms such as YouTube or short video clips through SNS

began to be used more.

The distinctive feature of the streaming era is that video is no longer just for recording, but is also now mainstream for creation, processing, and distribution. While the primary purpose of visual media has been to record and reproduce content, the emergence of live or recorded streaming using online platforms have turned these platforms into creative spaces, spurring the creation of video works.

The use of these video distribution platforms has progressed rapidly since the pandemic that began since 2020. People have begun to distribute video clips as works that they have created and processed on a screen. The background of the execution of IDF online in 2020 was under this situation.

3. IDF since 2020 to 2024

Below, I will describe the trajectory of the execution of IDF since 2020 to 2024. The titles and staff members and main programs of each year are as follows[5)]:

(1) **IDF 2020 online** "***.zip Daya: Cari Cara***"
Program Manager: Ratri Anindyajati,
Curators: Arco Renz, Linda Mayasari, Nia Agustina, Rebecca Kezia.
Opening: Serial performances by 1'59 and collaborators
Closing: *LiTuTu* by Ayu Permatasari
(2) **IDF 2022 in-person** "***Rasa: Beyond the Body***"
Director: Ratri Anindyajati House Curator Linda Mayasari
Curatorial Consortium: Arco Renz, Hartati, Linda Mayasari, Nia Agustina, River Lin, and Sal Murgiyanto(curatorial consultant).
Opening: "*SILO*" by Hari Gulur (Surabaya, Indonesia)
Closing: *No. 60*, Pichet Klunchen (Thailand)

5) In addition to this, the name of Nungki Kusumastuti, Melina Surya Dewi, and Maria Darmaningsih are mentioned as the founder and consulting committee.

(3) **IDF 2024 in-person "*Liquid Ranah*"**
Director: Ratri Anindyajati
Curators: Arco Renz, Linda Mayasari, Nia Agustina, River Lin.
Opening: *Bedhaya Hagoromo* by Didik Nini Thowok (Yogyakarta, Indonesia)
Closing: *Pan Xian* by Huang Huai-Te (Taiwan)

Also, the following presentations and discussions were distributed online between each year's in-person festivals.

2021 online "*Layar Terkembang Body and Rasa in Terra Incognita series*." (Billowing Sails: Body and Rasa in Unexplored Territory)
2021 online "*Layar Terkembang Virtual Body series*."
2023 online "*Layar Terkembang Tubuh di dalam Jeda Lipatan Waktu*" (Billowing Sails: Body in the Folds of Time)

Looking at the trajectory of the execution of the festival over the past five years, the following characteristics can be noted: the 2020 festival was the catalyst that stimulated the presentation and discussion of works in the online world, the performance and discussion in both the online and in-person spaces have become more substantial, and video shooting and editing techniques have evolved and become more important. IDF 2022 and IDF 2024 were held in-person, and after 2020, the accumulation of works and discussions online has led to the pursuit of diverse body representations and the enrichment of the discourse. Below, I examine the status of each year's event and summarize its characteristics, referring to some impressive works.

3-1 IDF Online 2020

In 2020, the festival was held online due to the covid-19 pandemic. The title of the 2020 was "*IDF 2020.zip Daya: Cari Cara*" that means "Zip. Power: Find the Ways." The title reflected the circumstances at the

time when those involved were thinking about how to hold a dance festival online.

In IDF2020, with core dance works, the section named *Kampana* was added. *Kampana* is the presentation space mainly for the works of upcoming young choreographers. There was also the space of "zip. Conversations" where many dialogues and discussions had been executed. In the section named as "*Kampana* Trajectory," many young dancers presented their cultural experiences and the process of creating their works.

In the introduction of this working paper, I positioned the body in physical expression as the accumulation of artists' memories and experiences. Presentations of "*Kampana* Trajectory" consisting of their narrations and video clips of their activities, are considered as the important section to know and be aware of the young choreographers' cultural experiences and physical expression reflecting these experiences.

As I will discuss later, this online event made the organizers and the participants conscious of new ways of communicating and popularizing dance through video distribution. And, making use of this experience, in 2021, young dancers presented their works and held discussions on dance in the online platform under the title "*Layar Terkembang*: Body and Rasa in Terra Incognita series." (Billowing Sails: Body and Rasa in Unexplored Territory)

The pandemic has transformed IDF into more of a festival rather than a biennale, continuing forever in both the online and in-person worlds. As an international festival showcasing trends in contemporary dance held around the Jakarta Art Institution and Art Center TIM (Taman Ismail Marzuki Park), it has welcomed many participants, including guest dancers from Indonesia and abroad, and presented a variety of results.

At the "zip. Conversations" in IDF2020, various discussions were held regarding the method of holding the festival online.

It is evident that the performances are being made into edited video

works in the online festival, and we need to consider the merits and demerits of the situation continuously. The merits of seeing the performance online are : ①audiences can see the performances from anywhere and as many times they like utilizing the platforms of video distribution such as YouTube. ②audiences can see the video clips sometimes with reading the commentary or seeing other video clips such as talks or interviews of the artists.

There are also demerits to the online distribution: ①The most prominent one is that audiences can't participate in the actual site of the performances, and can't know or feel the atmosphere of the live performances directly. ②Although online communications are available through comments, it is difficult to do the direct interaction between the artists and audience[6)].

Here I would like to introduce some interesting insights of an Indonesian novelist, Ayu Utami presented during online discussion "*zip. Conversations*" in IDF2020[7)]. She positioned dance as "poetry in the language of the body"(*puisi di dalam bahasa tubuh*), and spoke about the advantages and challenges of holding the festival online as follows:

> The advantage of holding an event online is that it transcends various boundaries of time and place, allowing people from different parts of the world to participate online.
> On the other hand she mentioned three challenges; ①Our Indonesian view of the body is different from the Western mind-body dualism, in that the mind and body are inseparably linked. This view of the body is extremely vulnerable and defenseless against the intervention of technology, if not with critical thinking. ②When held online, the live performance or "presentation" is replaced by a

6) Although I couldn't discuss in this article, we need to protect the creator's copyright.

7) zip. Conversations Presence: Where Are We Now? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBEOlutBZsA&t=7901s
Accessed in 16th December, 2024.

> "representation" on a computer screen. ③The digital divide separates those who can access and participate in online festivals from those who cannot (Ayu Utami's talk in *zip. Conversations Presence-Where Are We Now?*)

The above points are highly suggestive when thinking about online festivals in Indonesia. As Ayu Utami pointed out, the mind and the body have been considered to be inseparably linked in the traditional view of Indonesian people. Explaining the concept of "*rasa*" (that means feeling, emotion, or taste)[8] listed by great educator and thinker Ki Hadjar Dewantara, Ayu Utami examined how human body rooted in culture cannot be fostered by intellectual and rational thinking alone. The stakeholders of IDF 2020 faced the execution of an online dance festival, and they pursued the possibilities of the various physical expressions. It was a challenge to overcome the vulnerability of the traditional view of the body that the mind and the body are indivisible.

I will examine the characteristics of the online dance festivals by looking at the case studies below.

One is the attempts to integrate physical expression and discourses in the performance.

The first case study is the performance of gymnastics by a temporally collective "Gymnastik Emporium." The group continues to hold performances and workshops aimed at reflecting on the control of the body during the Suharto regime[9]. In Indonesia, gymnastics called "morning gymnastics" had been disseminated in 1975. The movement of the gymnastics, as a fusion of martial arts and Japanese gymnastics, were so complicated. "Morning gymnastics" were difficult to practice, while people liked to see the performance.

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8) "*rasa*" has various meanings, such as "taste," "emotion," and "feeling"

9) Suharto regime continued since 1966 to 1998 and it is also called as "*orde baru*"(new order). It is known as the authoritarian regime that continued for 32 years long.

In the 1980s, gymnastics called "gymnastics for body health"/body refreshing (*Senam Kesegaran Jasmani* SKJ) had been disseminated. The exercise of SKJ has come to be performed as a national duty. Gymnastik Emporium's activities aim to share with people the history of gymnastics and the way the body has been controlled by the state through performing the exercises, teaching them to many people, and performing together. The aim is to share the experience or perspectives with the members of society[10].

In the 2020 online performance, the members performed the exercises while speaking one by one about their relationship with gymnastics. The footage showed the entire stage from the audience's perspective, and when a statement was being made, there was a close-up of the member speaking. The video technique was simple, filming the stage from the audience's perspective, occasionally focusing on an individual. The visual effects were also simple, in the form of exercises and speech, with no video processing. The performers on this occasion were a mixed team of school teachers[11].

The title of the gymnastic performance in 2020 was "SKJ 2020." It means gymnastics of diverse bodies (*Senam Keragaman Jasmani*). SKJ originally means the gymnastics for the refreshment of bodies (*Senam Kesegaran Jasmani*), and the SKJ 2020 was a parody of the original SKJ.

In this work, each performer performs gymnastic exercises while talking about the various interpretations of SKJ seen since the time of the Suharto order (*orde baru*). The contents of the talks were varied, including

10) In November 2023, I did the interview with the collective's director and dramaturg Irfanuddien Ghozali. Born in 1982, he positioned himself as the person in "transition of generation (*generasi transisi*) and positioned his generation as "one that views the Suharto order (*orde baru*) like watching the theater play. He also stated that his generation clearly distinguishes itself from older generations that actually experienced the Suharto order, and that he is keenly aware of the need to take part in activities that will allow him to reexamine that era. He recalls that gymnastics class (*senam wajib*) was what he hated most when he was in elementary school in the 1990s, which is why he chose gymnastics as a subject to think about the controlled body. He told that "the purpose of the collective's practices are to consider the issue of our body (*isu tubuh kita*), and to indicate the discourse (*wacana*) about physical theater (*teatre tubuh*)".

11) Performance: #SKJ 2020 by Gymnastik Emporim https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3FhBtGBlM0&t=293s
Accessed in 16th December 2024.

interpretations of gymnastic movements in relation to religion, examinations of the distinction between dance and gymnastics, conscious discourse on SKJ's control of the bodies of its citizens, and discourse that considers racial issues and gymnastics through the reinterpretation of Chinese physical practices into the section of gymnastics. At the end of the performance, there is a scene in which one dancer remains to perform. The meaning of the scene was that the performance expressed a situation in which the dancer wanted to be free from the power of control, but could not be. This presentation shows the attitude that we need to be conscious of the fact that our bodies are controlled in many ways even today.

The focus on gymnastics in the context of a dance festival and the various interpretations of gymnastics as a form of national physical control were unique aspects of this work. In order to realize this event online, the IDF 2020 invited audience submissions, two of them were selected as the best works and distributed. The collective's emphasis was not only on the contents of the performance, but also on the methods and approaches[12)].

One more example is the work utilizing the effect of video editing. It is the work titled "*Rubuh Tubuh*" (Collapse of Touching Bodies). The work depicted the difficulty of physical contact under the pandemic situation. The production method combines the effects of staging and video technology, and is positioned as a work that takes advantage of its online distribution status. The conceptor of this work is Indonesian dancer and choreographer, Eko Supriyanto. In the credits of the clip, the concept of the work is written as follows:

> The body collapsing. The desire to meet face-to-face is strongly desired. The closeness of meeting is limited. It is a new space, a virtual

12) Performance: winner of Gymnastik Partisipatori https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idYHVCjeJTk&t=892s
Accessed in 16th December 2024.
The participatory approach has been also applied to other cases besides gymnastics, such as local rituals.

> space. In the virtual meeting, the body's activity is limited. Touching is not possible. We cannot feel warmth. Many senses are blocked by time and space. This work, in which many imaginations and thoughts are nostalgic, is about nostalgia and the collapsing body[13)].

This piece depicts a situation in which several dancers dance in an outdoor meadow, trying to touch each other but unable to. With the natural landscape as the performance site, the fantastic atmosphere of the contemporary musical piece titled "*Birds in Warped Time II*" composed by Somei Satoh had been featured in the work. It is positioned as a created work utilizing video editing and video distribution techniques.

In addition to the presentation of works that challenged the situation of physical expression online, as described above, IDF2020 was characterized by a full range of discourses such as "zip. Conversations" and "*Kampana* Trajectory." Two interesting points were the use of video distribution platforms to stimulate discussion, and the sharing of information about the works and the artists' memories and experiences behind them with a large audience.

In the online press conference, the founders (Maria Darmaningsih, Nungki Kusumastuti, and Dewi Lina) stated, "We have been through many political upheavals, economic crises, disasters, and other situations that have made it difficult to dance, but we have continued to hold festivals."(Press Conference of IDF 2020.zip DAYA: Cari Cara)[14)].

The program also included the distribution of excellent works by

13) Indonesian version is as follows: Rubuh Tubuh, rasa ingin bertemu tersangatkan. Intensitas pertemuan, tetap muka terbatasi.Adalah ruang baru, ranah virtual. Aktivitas tubuh banyak dibatasi oleh pertemuan virtual, tak bisa memegang, tidak bisa merasakan kehangatan pertemuan, kita terhambatkan ruang dan waktu. Rindu banyak rasa, banyak imajinasi, banyak pikiran. Karya ini adalah tentang rindu dan tubuh rubuh yang sendiri. Rubuh Tubuh//Bodily Archive-Road to IDF 2020 zip Daya: Cari Cara https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO_BUTRxFq8&t=434s
Accessed in 16th December 2024.

14) Press Conference of IDF 2020.zip DAYA: Cari Cara https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boYJx0nN7B8&t=1074s
Accessed in November 2020.

viewers and a form of online participation. The festival showed a strong message that even in the midst of a global emergency, we must not forget to enjoy dancing together. As indicated by the title "*Cari Cara*," (find the way), the organizers' strong will to realize an ecosystem through dance while exploring new methods was demonstrated.

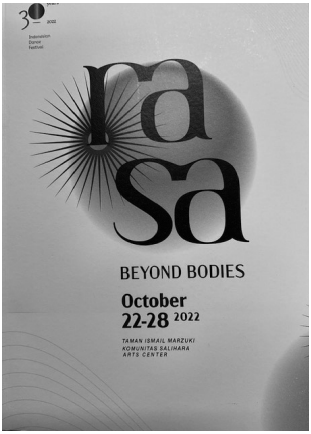
3-2 IDF 2022 in-person "*Rasa: Beyond Bodies*"

IDF2022 was the first festival to be held with in-person presentations since the pandemic, as well as the 30th anniversary of the festival. After the pandemic of the online festival in 2020 and the online presentation in 2021, IDF is no longer a biennale, but rather a festival that continues to present and discuss works in both the in-person and online worlds. 2022 was the first in-person festival after such a change.

The 2022 IDF was held to commemorate the 30th anniversary. It was mainly held in-person, with discussions and other events streamed online under the title of "*Rasa: Beyond Bodies*." Also to commemorate the 30th anniversary, an exhibition was held showcasing the history of the festival so far.

In 3-1, I mentioned about the difficulty of performing online in situations where the body and mind are inseparable. After the execution of IDF 2020, the organizers have presented the importance of the concept of *rasa*, a concept that unites the body with emotions and sensations. This concept, of Sanskrit origin, which means taste or feeling, connects the mind and the body, and is a concept that embodies the inseparability of the mind and the body. As discussed below, it was used in the title of the series of the *Layar Terkembang* 2021 event, and is also a key word in the title of the 2022 event. The use of such titles indicates the importance that the organizers have attached to the characteristics of Indonesian dance.

The opening performance was a work titled "*SILO*" by Hari Ghulur, a dancer from Surabaya/Madura. The piece was a development of a work titled "*Sila*," created when he became a resident of the American Dance



program book of IDF2022

Festival. Hari Ghulur has focused on the "*Sila*," a seated posture used in the *tahlil* religious ritual he has been familiar with since childhood, to create a piece that emphasizes movement of the torso. The "*Sila*" presented at IDF2020 (online) was performed by four dancers in a mosque[15], but for 2022, Hari Ghulur and the company members have composed a production suitable for a large theater. The work emphasized intense movement stemming from the instability of posture and the repetition of the dialogue with God. Many audience members enjoyed the work by feeling their tension, and it was an opportunity to share the joy of experiencing the taut atmosphere of the venue live.

The closing work was "*No. 60*" by Thai contemporary dancer Pichet Klunchen. This work is the result of Pichet's development of 59 basic forms of *thepanon*, in a traditional Thai dance drama called *khon*, which he has been practicing in his body. This work presents the possibility of rationally thinking about and mastering this 700-year-old traditional dance (IDF 2022 program book pp. 32-33). Co-performer, Kornkarn Rungsawang, a dancer who has studied Thai *lakhon*, also explores physical expression based on traditional dance. The creation of a contemporary dance based on Thai traditional dance had a great impact on Indonesian audiences by showing the possibility of physical expression and its development trained by tradition, and by giving them a sense of both commonality with their cultural tradition and a novel point of view.

Kornkarn Rungsawang also performed the work titled "*Dance Offering*"

15) Sila by Hari Ghulur https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahJg5cj5NhU&t=317s Accessed in November 2020.

in the category of *Kampana*. The work is based on the Thai traditional performance called "*Rum-Kea-Bon*" (IDF2022 program book p.41). In the performance, Kornkarn invited some audiences to offer wishes through a digital shrine and if their wishes are answered, she danced as a form of reciprocal offering. Utilizing the VR (virtual reality) headset and AR applications, the work explored the virtual spaces and virtual body in the in-person performance site. The work can be positioned as one with new possibilities to combine the artist's physical expression, audiences, and the virtual world.

One more suggestive work in *Kampana* was "*Body Tarekat*" performed by M. Safrizal. According to the program book of IDF2022, "the performance that both builds on and departs from embodiment practices while doing "*tarekat*," specially the *Qadriyah tarekat* from Aceh. *Tarekat*, in a general context, is a method or path to get close to The Almighty by praising named of his greatness. For the choreographer, "*tarekat* is life, in a way of how he perceives life and existence itself" (IDF 2022 program book p.39). In this performance, movements and the repetitions to unite with The Almighty were performed for over an hour, and the audience shared the time and space. This performance, in which physical movements and the atmosphere created by these movements were fostered over time, was something that could only be achieved in this in-person setting.

The aforementioned Gymnastik Emporium implemented an audience-participation performance titled "*Senam Kota Kita*" (gymnastics of our city) in a large theater in 2022. Under the guidance of an instructor, the event focused on the city of Jakarta and provided an opportunity for performers and audience members to perform gymnastics together. The audience was invited to participate in the performance, but the emphasis here was not only on having fun, but also on sharing the history of gymnastics and physical control with as many people as possible. Photos of gymnastics during the colonial period and the Japanese occupation were projected on

Performance of "*Senam Kota Kita*"
photo by author 25th October 2022

the background screen.

The 2022 in-person program is not so much a return from the online to the in-person format, but rather the emergence of a world of presentations and discussions that have persisted in the online space in the form of in-person meetings. The 2022 program was realized against the backdrop of a substantial body of work and discussion online. The works were presented primarily in in-person settings at multiple venues. Discussions also took place in person, some of which were streamed online.

The program for 2022 consisted of four parts: a presentation of core works, a presentation of works by mostly young dancers called "*Kampana*," dance workshops, and a session of talks. The section of *Kampana* had been added in 2020. Until 2018, it was positioned as "Showcase." Because IDF 2020 was the online event, in the talk session of IDF 2022, the intention of setting the *Kampana* section was explained. The section *Kampana*, a Sanskrit word meaning "vibration" was created in order to produce a deeper and freer space for dialogue and creation. This section was created to allow curators and various stakeholders to deepen the dialogue, including the dancers' cultural backgrounds and life experiences, and to reach a mutual understanding of the creative work[16)]. In the section 3-1, I mentioned

16) Talk of Nia Agustina in IDF 2022 Dance Talk (*Bincang Tari*)

the difficulties of organizing an online dance event in the context of the inseparability of body and spirit, and this explanation of "*Kampana*" gives us an idea of the willingness of those involved to overcome such challenges by deepening the connection between physical expression and discourse.

3-3 IDF 2024 in-person "*Liquid Ranah*"

IDF 2024 was held in person under the title of "*Liquid Ranah*" (liquid sphere). The festival opened with a performance of "*Bedhaya Hagoromo*" by representative female impersonator dancer from Yogyakarta, Didik Nini Thowok, female impersonator dancers, and the performers of *Noh* theater from Japan. The closing program was a performance of the *Pan Xian* by Huang Huai-Te from Taiwan.

IDF2024 was impressive in that the possibilities for diverse forms of physical expression were explored in both performances and talk sessions. In particular, many performances and discussions focused on the expression of gender and sexuality. The opening piece "*Bedhaya Hagoromo*," a fusion of Javanese court dance and Japanese *onnagata* (female Impersonation) traditions, prompted a reconsideration of the artistic tradition of *onnagata* in Asian dance traditions. In terms of the story world, it was based on legends found throughout Asia, including Japan and Indonesia (or in Southeast Asia). It is also significant that the performance of *onnagata* is positioned as one of the common traditions in Asia.

In the talk session titled "*The Mystical Gender in the Intersection of Artistic Stage and Daily Life*," various opinions on the trans-sexual body expression in contemporary dancing were exchanged.

The work titled "*The Synthetics of Hybrid Beings*" by Ishvara Devati, presented in *Kampana*, indicated the new hybrid identity after having the experience of Hormonal Replacement Therapy(HRT)(IDF2024 program book p. 61).

"*Pan Xian*," as the closing program was the result of a reexamination

Didik Nini Thowok performing "*Bedhaya Hagoromo*"
2nd November 2024 ©Elitha Evinora Beru Tarigan

of the ceremonial event within Traditional Han Opera and Taoist ritual (IDF2024 program book p.43). Various kinds of physical expression had been explored in the work, including traditional martial arts, modern dance, etc. Various gender expressions can be seen in the work, including a body trained in martial arts, masculine body, trained female body in modern dance, transsexual body movement, etc.

The presentations and discussions of these works provided an opportunity to explore the possibilities of physical expression and identity and diverse forms of physical expression, and to share these issues with the participants. As a festival held in Indonesia and as an international festival, the IDF has become an important arena for considering diverse senses of values on physical expression both in the local context and the global context.

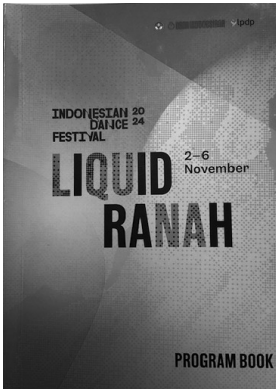
IDF2024 was the second in-person event since the pandemic, and the program had a very full lineup. Although there are some programs I don't know about because I couldn't follow all of them especially some work-in-progress performances, I think many programs were suggestive such as

performances of the core programs, *Kampana*, talk sessions, and site-specific performances[17].

Throughout the entire schedule, there were many experimental attempts, as well as many works that could be described as reinterpretations of traditions, utilizing the power of each region's artistic traditions[18]. The work itself was interesting, and at the same time, many of the intentions behind the work were conveyed to the audience through the talk. Some talk sessions are distributed through the online platform.

The site-specific performances that took place twice during the festival utilized the open-air space of TIM, with many audience members surrounding and participating in the dance performances. As the center of Jakarta's art scene, this event has created a situation in which people gather to watch and enjoy dance together, sometimes even becoming potential performers.

The *Graha Bhakti Budaya* Theater, where the opening and closing ceremonies were held, was attended by about 1,000 people, creating a space where many people could think and feel about dance and the state of physical expression.



program book of IDF2024

17) The category of site-specific performance itself is new in 2024, but its equivalent was seen before then. Nia Agustina , one of the current curators, cites the performance in 2016 that performed in the form of a parade in TIM, in an attempt to consider the power of demonstration("Rough Machine/Soft Power" by Fitri Setyaningsih and Punkasila), and the collaborative creation by Mexican dancer Mariana Artega and a yoga group, Yoga Gembira, performed in yoga practice space in Suropati Park (e-mail communication with Nia Agustina 3 January 2025).

18) A striking feature was the original perspectives in the research and the way the results were presented. For example, in "Ridden," a work dealing with the relationship between nature and humans after a disaster, the characteristic movements of a sailor were repeated intermittently, and cardboard objects reminiscent of a shelter were placed on the stage. As for the works in Kampana category, in "Sanghyang," a work focusing on the traditional Balinese ritual of sanghyang, physical expressions were performed with video images and songs, and in "Ping," the dynamic music featured drum, or *kendang*, and physical movement featuring hip movement that based on West Javanese folk dance "*Bajidoran*" were presented.

3-4 *Layar Terkembang* (*Billowing Sails*) 2021, 2023

Programs titled "*Billowing Sails*" were also supported to explore the practice of IDF in the online space. The title of each year, decided by Ratri and Linda, are the combination of some languages (Indonesian, Sanskrit, Latin, English) and indicate the complexities of new spheres of expression. These are as follows:

2021 online "*Layar Terkembang Body and Rasa in Terra Incognita series*" (Billowing sails: Body and rasa in unexplored territory) and "*Virtual Body series*"

2023 online "*Layar Terkembang Tubuh di dalam Jeda Lipatan Waktu*" (Billowing sails: Body at Rest in the Folds of Time)

The works have many unique innovations based on the premise that they will be presented online. For reasons of space limitation, I will examine only one work as an example. This work, titled "*Titik Koma Koma*"(moment of commas), combines a dance performance with a metalworking video. The two scenes, which would be difficult to perform simultaneously on a stage facing each other, were effectively combined through video editing. ("*Titik Koma Koma*" by Tyobabond)[19)]

Below is the statement by the creator:

> "*Titik Koma Koma*" emerged from an intentional interpretation of how the body is positioned in context to the process. Their current being is the result of studying past ignorance. In their journey, each step becomes a space that cannot be repeated nor revisited. This space turns into an abstraction and cannot be mapped.
>
> What makes for an interesting reading is that "the present body" is a manifestation of a process within a space, meanwhile "the future

19) "*Titik Koma Koma*" by Tyobabond https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3asY1a3Kbg&t=389s Accessed in 16th December 2024.

> body" is a manifestation of the present body. But how and what is "the future body" has never been answered before he himself was overcome.

In the panel discussion held after the video distribution, the creator Tyobabond stated "Not only are we unable to know the bodies of others, but even the path our own bodies have taken is merely a memory and we do not fully understand it. This work was conceived from such a perspective."

"It shows four points of existence: the present moment, the state of becoming, the abstract space of memory, or image, and the spirit of the path that the body follows. The video of the metal forging process was combined as a metaphor for the moment and for what is being forged and made."

"My father is a traditional dancer. Although I myself chose to be a contemporary dancer because of my upbringing, I presented my own body, and my father also participated in the performance to show the impact of the existence of the traditional body."

As indicated in the above statement, dancers' bodies are positioned as the result of accumulations of memories and experiences in this work. The perspective indicates the commonality with the position of body described in the Introduction to these discussion papers. The work also positions the trial of the pursuit of new possibilities as the edited video clip where the dance presentation and the scene of metal forging are combined technically.

The online execution of IDF 2020 had a significant impact on the perceptions of those involved, foreshadowing possibilities that were not limited. They described it as a "blessing in disguise" and pursued new possibilities for expression in the online space, and *Layar Terkembang* 2021 is the result of their pursuit of such possibilities. After IDF2022, *Layar Terkembang* 2023 was held online under the theme "*Tubuh di dalam Jeda Lipatan Waktu*"(body in the fold of time). More works were accumulated

under the theme[20]. Many of the works were delivered as 15-20 minute edited video clips. In addition, video clips of talk sessions in which the artists discussed each of the works were also made available. Through "*Layar Terkembang*" series, viewers can learn about the work, as well as comments about the work, how it came to be, the cultural experiences of the dancers, and so on.

4. Conclusion

4-1 Dance Festival Utilizing Online Platform

From the above examples, the following can be noted as characteristics of performance in the online era:

First, discourse is becoming increasingly important. Discourse is considered important in both performance and discussion opportunities, with emphasis placed on artists talking about their works, the findings of their research activities, the idea and the concepts behind their works, and the background to their creations. Aforementioned researcher Raditya pointed out the development of discourses, profound research, and creative exploration as the characteristics of the third age (2010-2020) in Indonesian contemporary dance (Raditya 2021: 105-114). The situation of IDF where discourse is becoming increasingly important, is thought to be similar to his opinion. Also, the same situation can be seen in the field of visual arts where discourse is also emphasized. While the concept derived of local language are explored, discussions in English were actively broadcasted, and local language discussions were given English subtitles, so there was a strong tendency to emphasize English discourse as an international dance festival.

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20) Since 2023, the project named "*Lawatari* (*melawat tari*) (dance visiting)"had been started. It is the trial to share the work presentation and discussion in various regions in Indonesia. IDF originated the center city Jakarta is expanding the ecosystem through dance to various regions in the country.

Also, in relation to the emphasis on discourse, it can be noted that there is a strong tendency to place more importance not only on the performance content itself, but also on the concept and method of approach. These discourses will be presented online through talk sessions, panel discussions, etc. Additionally, the footage of the performances will include explanations of the concepts behind them, which will be distributed online along with the performances. It is necessary for the artists to talk about their work and concept, to state their thoughts on some social situation, as well as presenting their performances in both online and in-person spaces.

Secondly, there has been an increase in video clip productions of performances rather than just archival footage of the performances. As the performance as a video clip work became more important, the role of the shooting staff and video editors became more important, and edited music and sound were often used. In this situation, various roles including video makers, sound designers, etc. are assigned to produce a single video work.

Thirdly, video distribution platforms such as YouTube are being used. Rather than being limited pages, methods that allow many people to access the content freely are being used. By the video distribution platform, the way people see the dance performance had changed from getting some software to referring, choosing and participating the programs.

The distribution platform produces the scene where many people participate and exchange the comments each other. The tendencies were also observed in festivals that were held in-person, where the discursive aspects, particularly the discussions and talks, were widely distributed through video streaming platforms.

The IDF2020 online event was followed by *Layar Terkembang* in 2021, and dance performances were enhanced in both the online and in-person spaces.

The production of online video clips flourished, finding its way online.

While some of the works were video recordings of regular performances, most of the works were presented with an awareness of the body as it is represented on the screen. A variety of works were created by combining physical expression itself, the space and location where physical expression took place, sound, and video processing techniques. The quality of dance works in the post online era are sometimes evaluated not only from the originality of the performances, but also from the degree of completion as video works.

Discussions were also enriched in both spaces, and discourses were forged and deepened. The presentation and sharing of concepts, the content and quality of the narratives grew in importance, the performance of the work was supported by the discourse, and a close relationship between the performance and the discourse was observed.

The 2022 in-person event was an opportunity for people to share the joy of coming together again after the accumulation of presentations in online spaces, and to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the event. Although there were still many participants wearing masks, people enjoyed the face-to-face performances and lively discussions. The program was well organized, including discussions, workshops, etc. An exhibition was also held to look back on the 30 years since the program began in 1992, creating an opportunity for many participants to experience the history of contemporary dance in Indonesia.

After *Layar Terkembang* in 2023, the IDF will continue to enrich the work of many dancers, including young artists. In addition to that, new attempts to reach out from the central city of Jakarta to other parts of the country had begun.

In IDF2024, participants from various regions of Indonesia and abroad presented works that confronted physical expression in the globalized age of modernity against a background of both online and in-person accumulation, and various discussions took place, creating a space for a large audience to

share them.

Artists are exploring their own unique forms of physical expression based on diverse artistic traditions, responding flexibly to the changes brought about by the online shift, and finding new avenues and possibilities in their activities.

On the other hand, there may be some challenges. While it is meaningful to share dance works and concepts at international festivals, and to engage in dialogue and share issues with curators and directors who come from many parts of the world, some of these concepts, including the fact that English is the dominant language, are somewhat difficult for the general public to participate in. In this sense, the IDF Producerial Open Kitchen at IDF2024 was an interesting talk session, as it provided an opportunity to discuss the organization of dance festivals in a public space, the Galeri Indonesia Kaya, with a large public audience. The discussion was illuminating in that it made an international event open to a large public audience.

In order to create an ecosystem of art as "socially engaged art" through dance, it is important to present social issues and global concepts. On the other hand, it is also important to ensure the quality of the performance itself. The problem of balancing social activities and the quality of artwork is also pointed out in the research of Helguera Pablo in the book on "socially engaged art" (Helguera 2011). The issue of the balance between social activities and the quality of artwork will be an important point when thinking about contemporary art activities, regardless the field.

In the midst of many ambitious works, it is necessary to widely demonstrate the importance of the quality of the performance in order to prevent the performance from becoming only an agenda-driven type. In this sense, the opening and closing works of each IDF event have ensured the high quality of presentation, and their leading performances have conveyed the appeal and importance of dance performance to many people. It is

precisely because of these unwavering performances that many young artists are provided with the opportunity to experiment in a variety of ways. Such a program structure is also very important.

4-2 The Era of Contemporary for Indonesian Artists

Finally, I would like to examine what is the characteristic of the activities of contemporary Indonesian artists and what kind of period is "contemporary" for them? Contemporary Indonesian society is the society of an era in which the powerful centralized authority, such as Suharto's regime, "*orde baru*" is absent. In this contemporary society, to what do they direct their expressive activities?

The researcher of Indonesian theater, Barbara Hatley positioned the contemporary era as "new freedoms, complexities, and challenges," (Hatley 2015: 4-7), and pointed out the characteristics of the era as follows:

> Performance activities, free of the political restrictions of the Suharto years, are vibrant and diverse. But conditions vary across the regions, and a new form of repression threatens, not from the centralized state apparatus but from within society, particularly from hardline groups claiming the right to defend Islamic religious values against perceived offence. Theatre practitioners respond by celebrating alternate pluralist values through their performance, while engaging dynamically with new global media such as digital recording, mobile phones and the internet (Hatley 2015: 4-5).

Although Hatley's study is on theatrical performances, the examination is suggestive to consider the characteristics of current physical performances including dance performances. We can point out the various kinds of flexibilities of contemporary performance artists, including the adaptation to

various senses of values, developing technologies, etc.

I would like to consider the IDF case study with regard to alternate pluralist values in Hatley's point above. Regarding the conflict between physical expression and social norms, including Islamic values, alternative values have been presented, such as the importance of increasing awareness of gender and sexuality expression from a global perspective, reevaluation of the value of traditional arts, and the importance of a healthy lifestyle. The emphasis on both the traditional value of transgender dance performance and the importance of transsexual body expression in a global context, as seen in the aforementioned presentation and discussion of works at IDF 2024, may also be an example of the pluralist values.

Regarding the activities using the various technologies, we can see a balance in the use of both the enhancement of in-person staging and the high-quality distribution in the online space. This is due in large part to the ambitious work of the artists and the technical contribution of the video shooting and editing team, along with the ideas of the online platform conceptors.

The people and artists involved in IDF have been pursuing new possibilities for physical expression while maintaining a sense of pluralistic balance and dealing with the diverse values of contemporary society. They have emphasized both adaptation to global norms and presentation of the power of local dance traditions and local arts. This is due to the rich dance traditions in Indonesia, as well as the fact that the director, organizing team members, and curators are knowledgeable about global art trends as well as local artistic traditions, and have been supportive of the creative process of the ambitious works created by the young artists.

The Indonesian case may serve as a suggestive example of contemporary art practice in Southeast Asia.

In a symposium commentary posted in Hatley's book, anthropologist Ariel Heryanto noted that the term "post new order," which is so often used,

is a sign that we are still trapped in the shadow of the new order (Heryanto 2015: 253-255). Indeed, the Suharto regime was a period of enormous influence. As he points out, the post-XXX era, including the present age, is not completely free from past history and epoch-making events. Rather, it is an era in which we are looking back at these past eras together, sharing challenges, and exploring ways of living

Based on this opinion, what should dance performances be like in the post-pandemic era, the post-online distribution era? The mission of IDF is to explore ways of living by confronting history and facing the times through constructing the ecosystem of physical expression. Facing both online and in-person spaces, the IDF's endeavors would continue in the future.

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Authors Information

Madoka FUKUOKA

Professor of cultural anthropology at the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, Japan

She completed her BA from Tokyo University of the Arts; MA from the Graduate School of Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts; PhD from the Graduate University for Advanced Studies, SOKENDAI, Japan. She is a member of International Council for Traditional Music and Dance, Society for Ethnomusicology, Society for Research in Asiatic Music(in Japan), Society of Cultural Anthropology (in Japan), Society for Studies on Popular Music (in Japan), and Society for Southeast Asian Studies (in Japan). Her research areas include Musicology, Area Studies (Southeast Asia), Cultural Anthropology, Gender Studies, and Art Studies. She is the author of *Indonesian Cross Gender Dancer Didik Nini Thowok* (2018, Osaka University Press), the editor of *Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2023, Jenny Stanford Publishing).

Saori HAGAI

Professor at Ritsumeikan International, Ritsumeikan University, Japan, specializing in Comparative Education, Educational Anthropology, and Cambodian Education Studies

She earned her Master's and Doctoral (PhD) degrees from Nagoya University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. Her research focuses on the preservation and transformation of Khmer classical dance, ASEAN integration and citizenship education in Cambodia, and the ethnography of Thai-Cambodian cross-border children. Dr. Hagai's recent publications include "Localizing Transnational Norms in Cambodia: Cases of ESD and ASEAN Citizenship Education" (Ogisu, T., & Hagai, S., 2024) in Compare: *A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, and a chapter on "Citizenship Education in Cambodia: National and Regional ASEAN Citizenship Education in Post-Conflict Contexts" in the book *Citizenship Education in the ASEAN Community* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2023).

Hiroyuki YAMAMOTO

Associate professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University, Japan

He specialises in area studies on Southeast Asia especially Malaysia, and has been managing research projects related to national/ethnic identity, disaster risk management, and film/theatre and society in Southeast Asia. Prior to his current appointment at Kyoto University, he had held various appointments including visiting research associate at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in Sabah, and lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. He published co-edited books such as *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* (Routledge, 2011), *Bangsa and Umma: The People grouping Concepts in Islamized Southeast Asia* (Kyoto University Press, 2011), and *Yasmin Ahmad: Malaysia's Most Memorable Storyteller* [in Japanese] (Eimei Information Design, 2019).

Ai TAKESHITA

Graduated from the Graduate School of Language and Society at Osaka University, where she earned her doctoral degree (Ph.D.) in 2011. She currently serves as a lecturer at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Her expertise lies in contemporary Indonesian culture and literature. Since a study abroad stint at the Faculty of Literature, Universitas Indonesia in 1995, she has visited Jakarta twice annually, living and integrating into local communities in the city's lower-class neighborhoods. She observes the weaving, consumption, and transformation of popular culture texts — like movies, novels, and magazines — amidst globalization and digitalization. Her publications include "Utopia of Reversal" (2022, Genron), and translations like Ayu Utami's "Saman" (2007, Moseisha). She has also co-authored books such as *Popular Culture in Indonesia* [in Japanese] (1996, Mekon) and *Popular Culture in Southeast Asia* [in Japanese] (2018, Style Note).

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