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Dancing the Silent Dhikr : Negotiating Temporality and Reciting Litanies in the Zapin Dance in Maritime Southeast Asia

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Dancing the Silent Dhikr: Negotiating Temporality and Reciting Litanies in the Zapin Dance in Maritime Southeast Asia

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One of the many Sufi practices, which utilize dhikr (recitation of the divine names or litanies) that is muted by non-verbal inward recitations, could be observed in the Zapin dance in the coastal areas of maritime Southeast Asia. Performed by Zapin dancers who are followers of Tariqat or 'way' of the sharia't, which literally means "the road to the watering place," dancing the silent dhikr symbolizes the broad way in which the performer-practitioners find way to travel and seek God. The accompaniment of music and the physical movement of performing a structured movement system portray ephemeral permeation of Islamic aesthetics and Malay artistic conventions while negotiating the traditional mode of temporality that is diachronically and synchronically linear in form, time and space. This temporality that is curled from the past remains important in the present as the performers negotiate their togetherness as Sufis and practitioners of religious and cultural practices that are embedded in mute dhikr, which plays an important role in sustaining Malay-Islamic traditional performance practices that is essential in seeking the realm of the altered other. This paper will discuss how dichotomies of the past and the present are negotiated within the traditional mode of temporality that progresses lineally through the procession of the past (diachronic), present (extant and synchronic) and future (impending) through the silent dhikr in the Zapin dance of Southeast Asia.

Sufism is affirmed through the teaching of *tariqah* or way of the *sharia't*. The word *sharia't* literally means "the road to watering place" implying true knowledge. In the broadest sense, Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. In general Sufis have looked upon themselves as Muslims who take seriously god's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self. As such, they tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of soul over social interaction (Chittick, 1995: 102). *Tariqah* (Arabic: *طريقة* Ṭarīqah; pl. *طرق*; *ṭuruq*, or Turkish: *tarikah*) in Sufism is conceptually related to the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*" that is sought by the aspirants (*murīdīn*: singular *murīd*) of *tariqah* through the "guide" or *murshid*. A group of *murīdīn* of a *tariqah* desires the knowledge of knowing God and loving God or *faqīr* (Arabic: *فقير*), which they would refer to as "needing or desiring God's knowledge," or *al-Faqīr ilá l-Lāh* (Arabic: *الفقير إلى الله*). Once a *murid* enters the *tariqah*, he gets his daily recitations, or '*awrād*, which is authorized by his *murshid*. The '*awrād* or recitation is usually recited before or after

prayers (pre-dawn, afternoon and evening prayers) and may consist of reciting a certain formula for tens, hundreds or a thousand times.

Similarly, Sufi orders or *tariqah* engage in ritualized *dhikr* (Arabic: ذكْر, plural اذكار *adhakār*, which means remembrance, pronouncement or invocation of the names of God). In Southeast Asia, *dhikr* is considered an important extension to the recitation of *doa* (ordinary supplication to ask for divine blessing in general). *Dhikr* (remembrance of God's name or reciting litanies) takes the form of methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) or the names of God or of God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) or some formula such as "Allah hayy" (God is the Eternal one) with prescribed gestures, has become one of the fundamental rituals in *tariqah* or *tariqat*. A gathering to perform the *dhikr* ritual usually takes place in private homes or in closed public spaces. Such gatherings could be convened with the presence of a culturally structured movement system and musical accompaniment (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 35).

Almost all *tariqah* orders are named after its founder based on the chain or lineage of sheikhs known as the *silsilah* (Arabic: سلسلة). Except for the Naqshabandi order that goes back to the first Caliph Abu Bakr and the Prophet Muhammad, other *silsilah* leads back to the Prophet Muhammad through Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. The order is referred to the founder's name. For example, the *tariqah* and its *silsilah* of the "Rifai order" or "Rifaiyyah" is named after Sheikh Ahmad ar-Rafai while the *silsilah* of the "Qādirī order" is named after Sheikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and the *tariqah* is referred to as the "Qādirīyyah".

***Tariqah* in Southeast Asia**

The *tariqahs* were influential in spreading Islam beyond the Arabian peninsular and were brought to the rest of the Muslim world in Africa and Asia from the 9th to the 17th centuries. Sufis have played an important role in the Islamization of the Malay world in Southeast Asia through the teaching of Tasawuf or Sufistic traditions through Sufi organizations or communities. Sufism in Southeast Asia have produced rich literature from Sufi orders by well known Sufi literary figures from such as Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, Muhammad ibn Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, Hamzah Fansuri, Syams ad-Din as-Sumatrani, Nur ad-Din ar-Raniri, Syaikh Yusuf al-Khalwati, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim as-Samman al-Madani, and 'Abd as-Samad al-Palimbani (Rahim, 1995: 5-7). Sufi orders or *tariqah* are used for both the social organization and the special devotional exercises that are the basis of the order's ritual and structure (Voll, 1995: 109). *Tariqah* or Sufi orders in Southeast Asia gained ground through the *tariqah* or *Tariqat* Qadirriyyah, Syattariah, Kalwatiyyah Sammaniyyah and Kalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah.

One of the most widespread Sufi orders in Southeast Asia is Naqshabandiyah, which originated from Bukhara in Central Asia, in the late fourteenth century but spread to contiguous areas of the Muslim world within a hundred years. However, Naqshabandiyah came to Southeast Asia by way of the Malay pilgrims and students from Mecca and Medina in Hijaz, through the teachings of Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi (d. 1827), whose initiated descendents were known as Khalidi of the Khalidiyyah Sufi order. Disciples of Khalidiyyah in Southeast Asia were able to

secure permanent implantation of the Naqshabandiyah order or *tariqat* through their influence within the Malay royal courts or as Sufi ulama (religious leaders) or through their literary dispensation. One such disciple was Ismail Minangkabawi from Sumatra. After spending a long period of time in Mecca, Ismail Minangkabawi returned to Southeast Asia to settle in the island of Penyengat, the seat of the Riau royal house. Upon gaining the allegiance of the royal court, Ismail Minangkabawi propagated Khalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah in the Riau Archipelago. Another such disciple, Syaikh Abdul Wahab Rokam (d. 1926) was dispatched from Mecca in 1886 to spread Khalidiyyah throughout Sumatra from Aceh to Palembang. He was able to successfully establish a religious community (Pasantren) in Langkat, Sumatra and was instrumental in the spread of Naqshabandiyah in the Malay Peninsula through his three-year sojourn in Johor. Regional characteristics of Naqshabandiyah in the Malay world were further endowed after the Salafiyah influence after Wahhabi conquest in Hejaz (Saudi Arabia) severed links to Sufi order in Mecca (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 34).

The devotional act of repeating the names of God or of God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) in *dhikr* or supplications or formulas taken from hadith texts and verses of the Qur'an is usually done individually. But in some Sufi orders *dhikr* is instituted as a ceremonial activity, which may be ritually determined by the sheikh for his *murids*. Followers of Sufism engage in ritualized *dhikr* in accordance to each order or lineage (*silsilah*), which may include recitation, singing, instrumental music, dance, and ecstasy.

However, Sufi practices that are embedded in the performing arts of Southeast Asia are rarely known outside its circle of practitioners and has remained as an esoteric knowledge of the beholder. To an outsider, Sufi music or dance performances continue to be seen as conventional performances of folk traditions, performed for celebratory occasions or staged as public spectacle rather than a religious one. Yet *dhikr* or reciting litanies as a solemn form of supplication plays an important role in negotiating temporality in the *zapin* dance in maritime Southeast Asia, connecting the Malay world and the world of the Southern Arabian peninsular.

Temporality in Zapin dance: From Tariqah al-Alawiyah (Ba'Alawi) to Naqshabandiyah

Dhikr as a performative litany reinforces the quality of the state of being as a mode of temporality through the way of the *sharia't*, which literally means "the road to watering place." It implies the act of seeking the knowledge of the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*" by the aspirants or *murīdīn* through *tariqah* guided by the *murshid* or sheikh. In the Malay world of maritime Southeast Asia, this could be observed reclusively in the *zapin*, which was created through syncretic borrowing and adapting of the Arabic *zaffin* from the southern part of the Arabian peninsular. *Zaffin* is an exclusively male performance traditions normally performed in Hadhramaut and in the Arab quarters in Southeast Asia. The Malays created the Malay *zapin* from the Arab *zaffin* as a hybrid form which signifies respect and admiration to the Hadhrami Arabs or Sayyids in particular. Sayyid or Syed (سيد) is an honorific title that is given to the male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and thus they hold a special place amongst Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly the Malays who regard them as the bearers of the "Islamic way of life" in South East Asia. Hence, many of their customs

and traditions were regarded as rightful and proper, keenly observed and imitated by the Malays when suitable. The Arabs in Southeast Asia, however, were closely knit communities who shun any form of assimilation with the Malay communities. It was the Malays, eager to absorb the nuances of Islamic-Arabic way of life, which imitated and developed newer forms of cultural expressions after the Arabs. Since Malays were never allowed to participate directly with the Arab's cultural expressions, unless invited within the Arabic communities, the Malays created their own pseudo-Arabic expressions through music and dance. Zapin is an example par excellence (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2011 forthcoming).

Malay Zapin (which is now known by various other names such as Jipin, Jepin, Japin, Zafin and Dana in Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei and Singapore) on the other hand celebrates events associated with weddings, circumcisions, and social events of religious significance such as Maulidur Rasul (Prophet's birthday). It had taken roots amongst the Malay-Islamic communities in the Straits of Malacca to become one of the most widely spread Malay-Islamic folk dance and music traditions in insular Southeast Asia.

Reciting litanies through *dhikr* has been observed in the Arabic *zaffin* by practitioners or *murīdīn* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or otherwise known as the Ba-'Alawi in Hadrahmaut and in Southeast Asia. Ba'Alawi (با علوي) is a term derived from Bani Alawi (بني علوي) or Clan of the Alawi whose *silsilah* or lineage is founded by al-Faqih Muqaddam As-Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali Ba'Alawi al-Husaini (died in 653 AH or 1232 CE) who had studied from the students of Abu Madyan, who was a student of Abdul Qadir Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriyyah order. The members of Ba'Alawi *tariqah* are mainly Sayyid or Syed (سيد) whose ancestors hail from the valley of Hadhramaut. Hence, the 'Alawi Sayyids who had spread far and wide to the Malay Archipelago not only spread Sunni Islam from the Shafii school but also to a certain extent, the Ba'Alawi *tariqah* of Sufism.

Although the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or Ba'Alawi remains exclusively within the descendents of Sayyid or Syed (سيد) from Hadhramaut in Southeast Asia, similar practices of dancing the *dhikr* in *zaffin* could be observed in the practices of the Malay *zapin* although introverted as silent *dhikr* by the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* Naqshabandiyah. The inclusion of dance and music as a means of convening silent *dhikr* amongst Naqshabandis in Southeast Asia is exclusive to practitioners of *zapin*. Nevertheless, not all Zapin performers are *dhikr* practitioners. Although *zapin* signifies an Arabic-Islamic as well as Malay-Islamic performance traditions, it does not implicitly signify that *zapin* is *dhikr*. Only practitioners of Naqshabandiyah within the regions of the Straits of Malacca beginning from Langkat, Deli and Serdang in North Sumatra to the Riau Archipelago including parts of the southern Malay Peninsula, which form areas covered by the Tasawuf or Sufistic footprints Tariqat Khalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah, used *zapin* for *dhikr*.

Hence, Naqshabandiyah's leading characteristics of strict adherence to the *shari'ah*, a sobriety in devotional practice that results in the shunning of music and dance, a preference for silent *dhikr*, and a frequent (although by no means consistent) tendency to political involvement (Algar, 1995: 226) became less dogmatic. Silent or loud *dhikr* is considered important in Southeast Asia as an extension to the recitation of *doa* (ordinary supplication to ask for divine blessing in general).

Negotiating Temporality and Reciting Litanies in *Zapin*

The Malay *zapin* continues to portray ephemeral permeation of Islamic aesthetics and Malay artistic conventions through the passing of time. Remembering God through *dhikr* by uttering God's name and methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) stresses an inwardness of contemplating God's existence and his absolute transcendence, forms the corpus of *dhikr*'s affirmation of *tawhid* in *zapin*. However, it remains an esoteric practice by Naqshabandis within the region of the Straits of Malacca and the Riau Archipelago convened as silent *dhikr*. Malay-Islamic performative nuances are clearly observed in the Malay *Zapin* of the Straits of Malacca through the recognizable artistic manifestations that have absorbed and perpetuated the notion of *al Tawhid*, the essence of Islam that affirms Allah (SWT) to be the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master is recognized in Indigenous artistic manifestations based on the merging concepts of abstractions, stylizations and repetitions that is depersonalized through the abstractions (*mujarad*). It is derived from "one," "unique" (*wahid*) that is translated as in the unity of God, oneness, peerlessness, and utter transcendence of God. Islam declares the transcendence of God to be part and parcel of Islamic philosophy, of life and of the believers' way of asserting that God has created all humans capable of knowing Him in His transcendence (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2003).

A *zapin* is conventionally structured into three parts. The first part is marked by a *taksim*,¹ an improvised solo played by a single 'ud or locally known as the *gambus* (lute). The *gambus* is derived from the Middle Eastern 'ud, a pear-shaped chordophone with rounded wooden back and short fretless neck. It has five to eight strings in double courses and a single string that are plucked with fingers. The second part consist of a melodic section with *kopak*, a loud rhythmic *marwas* drumming patterns in interlocking style, while the final section is known as the *wainab* or *tahtim*, which forms the coda for a piece to end that utilizes an extension of the main melodic phrase and the loud *kopak* drumming pattern (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2004: 128-130). The divisional units or sections in the *zapin* music have become generic in areas along the Straits of Malacca.

The musical sections of *zapin* music correspond with the sections of the dance performance. All *zapin* performers are required to enter the dance area in a single file or in double rows and present a salutation to the musical prelude or *Taksim*, played by a single 'ud or *gambus* (lute) player. This is to be followed by the linear formation of *zapin* performers who dance facing one another while repeating dance motifs while tracing a recurring forward and backward floor plan, interrupted with a series of skips and squatting positions, which is also known as the *kopak*. At the end of each performance the dancers perform jumping and squatting dance motifs to the accompaniment of relatively faster drumbeats in the form of the *wainab* (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 37).

Dancing the *zapin* or playing *zapin* music could become silent *dikhr* only if the practitioner wishes to embody the body movements or musical pulses as pulses of the silent *dhikr* utterance. The litanies of *dhikr* are not heard beyond introvert individual recitations. It is performed as a silent *dhikr* while the *zapin* songs or *qasidah* are sung

by one of two singers. The dancers' 4-beat pattern from the pulses of their *dhikr* litanies frames the basic dance unit, which are accompanied by the musical sounds of the instruments such as the *marwas* hand drums and the *dok* barrel drum. A repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* hand drums punctuated by a *dok* drum over a 16-beat unit frames the dance motifs.

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

Within these chronological grammatical choreographic units, the *zapin* dancers interact with drummers and other *zapin* musicians with mnemonic vocalizations while sustaining the silent *dhikr* over improvised dance motifs. To practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, most of the improvisations that deal with syncopated dance movements within a colotomic unit of *zapin* music provide both spatial and sonic space for the inward contemplation of God's oneness and peerlessness, the spiritual essence of *Tawhid*. To non practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, the dance improvisations within the colotomic unit of *zapin* music with mnemonic vocalizations are deliberately made to impress or challenge new dancers or to encourage others to join in the dance or as signals to the musicians to end their performance. *Zapin* ends with a loud rhythmic *kopak* played by interlocking drumming patterns of the *marwas* hand drums. In this final section known as the *wainab* or *tahtim*, the litanies reached its climax. The word '*wainab*' is derived from the Arabic word *wainaq* (وعائق), which means embraced or hug (وعناق). The word *wainaq* (وعائق) appears in the Arab *zaffin* signifying the climatic yearning of wanting to be embraced by God or embracing God. In the Malay *zapin* it reinforces the pinnacle state of temporality of the silent *dhikr*. It is a knowledge of the esoteric, known and understood by those whose *tariqah* commands the *murīdīn* to embrace God's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self, best described as a Sufistic path.

Conclusion

As a secular performance, the Malay *zapin* seeks to define a hybridized performance connecting the Arab *zaffin* and all its significations of respect and admiration of the Sayyid or Syed (سيد) as descendants of Prophet Muhammad and the "Islamic way of life" to the Malay world. *Zapin* hold a special place amongst the Malays in Southeast Asia who regard it as the closest resemblance of an Islamic performance tradition, indigenous yet exogenous. However, *zapin* could be a form of mute *dhikr*

(remembrance or reciting litanies) consisting of mental or verbal repetition of one of the divine names over the regular 4-beat counts of drumming pattern executed through repetitive steps of dance motifs covertly practiced by Sufis in their *tariqat* as pulses of their *dhikr* litanies. To the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or the Ba'Alawi (با علوي) in Southeast Asia, its exclusivity of an Arab tradition from Hadhramaut negotiates temporality of diasporic descent group as aspirants or *murīdīn* of a *tariqah* who desires the knowledge of knowing God and loving God or *faqīr* (فقير). To the Naqshabandiyah in Southeast Asia, remembering God through *dhikr* by uttering God's name and methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) in *zāpin* stresses an inwardness of contemplating God's existence and his absolute transcendence, forms the corpus of *dhikr*'s affirmation of their temporality in seeking the knowledge of the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*."

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