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'at, 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
linearly 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’at. 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 Tariqah; pl. taraq, or
Turkish: tarikat) in Sufism is conceptually related to the ultimate truth or “haqiqah”
that is sought by the aspirants (muridin: singular murid) of tariqah through the
“guide” or murshid. A group of muridin of a tariqah desires the knowledge of
knowing God and loving God or faqir (Arabic: فقير), which they would refer to as
“needing or desiring God’s knowledge,” or al-Faqir ilá l-Lâh (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: ذکر, plural ذکار, 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 hāyy” (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 "Qādiri order" is named after Sheikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī and the tariqah is referred to as the "Qādiriyyah".

**Tariqah in Southeast Asia**

The tariqahs were influential in spreading Islam beyond the Arabian peninsula 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 Qadiriyyah, 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 *muridin* 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 *zafin* from the southern part of the Arabian peninsular. *Zafin* 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 *zafin* 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 zajfin by practitioners or murīdīn of tariqah al-Alawiyah or otherwise known as the Ba’Alawi in Hadramaut and in Southeast Asia. Ba’Alawi (بنا علوى) is a term derived from Bani Alawi (بني علوى) 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 zajfin 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, 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 dhikr 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 kinematic pulse, dhikr is first uttered during the first high timbre beat of the marwas drums. The first shahadah, Lā ilāha illal-Lāh, Muhammadun rasūlul-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 zikr 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 (وءاعاق), which means embraced or hug (وعاعاق). The word wainaq (وعاعاق) 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 muridin 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 *murid* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or the Ba’Alawi (بَا عَلْوٍ in Southeast Asia, its exclusivity of an Arab tradition from Hadhramaut negotiates temporality of diasporic descent group as aspirants or *muridin* of a *tariqah* who desires the knowing of God and loving God or *faqīr* (فَقْر). 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 *zapin* 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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1 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.