

# GEMA SILAPIN: HYBRIDITY OF DANCE AND MUSIC TRADITIONS IN MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

The Gema Silapin performance staged at the Kuala Lumpur International Arts Festival (KLIAF) on 16 - 17 September 2015 had implications on the Malaysian world of performing arts in which it has lifted the traditional *Zapin* dance and *Silat* as the basis of art creation. The performance was a combination of *Silat* and *Zapin* rhythms, which were played with a traditional and contemporary choreography. This article discusses the choreographer's creation on the combination of *Zapin* dance and *Silat* which was divided into three segments: Gema Silapin (*Zapin*), Pahlawanku (*Silat*) and Pusaran *Zapin* (a combination of *Silat* and *Zapin*). Based on the segments' formation, the choreographer has combined the *Zapin* dance movement and *Silat* as the basis of contemporary creation. In dance, hybridity is the boundary for creating a combination of dance or music forms to produce one performance. Dance in the form of hybridity expands experimentation and innovation as it gives freedom of creation to the choreographer.

**Key words:** Hybridity, Zapin, Silat, Traditional Malay Dance, Music, Contemporary

## Introduction

Gema Silapin, a performance staged at the Kuala Lumpur International Arts Festival (KLIAF) on 16 - 17 September 2015 had implications on performing arts in Malaysia, in which this show has promoted the *Zapin* traditional dance and *Silat* as the fundamental elements of arts creation. The performance was presented with such a high spirit of hybridity and promoted the *Zapin* and *Silat* as a part of the beautiful and rich Malay culture. Understanding how Gema Silapin was created with its hybrid elements is therefore of importance in order to help bring peace, using dance and music arts in particular, to the society in Malaysia which is nowadays often heated and tense.

*Silat* is a form of Malay martial arts. This type of self defense is believed to be one of the most deadly in the world, as it can bring a fatal blow to enemies. As time went by, *Silat* has developed to become more of a type of performing arts and a form of Malay dance.<sup>64</sup> This performance is usually accompanied by music.

*Zapin* is a form of Malay dance, performed with *silat*, dance, and melody.<sup>65</sup> This form of dance is accompanied by the *Selodang* or Arabic *gambus* (U'd) with the following characteristics: (1) three to four hand drums (*marwas*), (2) musical forms covering several segments including introduction (*taksim*) through solo performance of the stringed

<sup>64</sup>Alfirafindra, Raja. "Peran Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura Dalam Festival Tari Serumpun." *Jurnal Seni Tari*: 78, 2013, p. 84

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid*

instrument, traditional melody of the stringed instrument together with the *marwas* rhythm, and melody of vocal traditional poetry (*quatrain*) that are delivered in turn with the pattern of the *marwas kopak* (accented) to mark the start and end of the poetry verse, through to the end of the performance until the coda in the form of the *kopak*, extended to the final cadence, usually called *waenah*, *wainab*, or *tahtim*,<sup>66</sup> (3) the song rhyme that typically consists of quatrains and commonly sung in couplets, consisting of hints and meaning, (4) the melody uses common Malay *grenek* ornamentation.<sup>67</sup> Zapin and Silat are two elements taught to young Malays in the past, as a way to reflect upon aesthetic and physical qualities and defeating enemies. The attempt to combine Zapin and Silat has been done before in choreography.

Viewing from its musical aspect, Zapin's rhythm is probably made to become an accompaniment for silat because of the capability of the stringed instrument and marwas to produce harmonic sound. While the stringed instrument produces the melody that characterises Zapin themarwas on the other hand provides the percussive function to the dance and produces the sound of "tuk-tak-tung" that corresponds to the movements in the dance for movement and jumps, elements that are similarly found in Silat.<sup>5</sup> Gema Silapin is a novel choreography that includes elements of zapin and silat creatively. This masterpiece is segmented to three parts: Gema Silapin, that combines zapin and silat; My Hero, which features silat; and Pusaran, that features zapin. This article will further discuss and elaborate on how Gema Silapin, as a combination of zapin and silat, was created as an application of hybridity in Malay music and dance.

### Hybridity in Dance and Music

Hybridity is an attempt to stabilize the contest between two different things. Hybridity allows fluidity stabilization on those two things, which will make the identity of each element clearer. Besides that, hybridity emphasizes the presence of the new yet different identity as the Hegelian synthesis which maintains the characteristics of every shaping element, instead of the following the Marxian theory that combines two into one that becomes different from its two shaping elements.

The requisite for hybridity is the presence of contact between the two elements involved. Such contact may allow the forming of connecting bridges, thus it becomes the task of the creators to formulate relationships from the elements to become a new harmonic and empowering form. In the context of art, the concept of hybridity is often defined as an attempt to reach cultural fusion. Malaysia has had a long history in cultural hybridity with art forms combined with Hispanic, European, Arabic, and Chinese elements to create Malay art works.<sup>68</sup> To some extent, hybridity becomes an expression of native modernity to differentiate the locals from the colonialists.<sup>69</sup>

Cultural identity is not an issue when hybridity is implemented over two elements of the same culture. Silat and Zapin are two elements of Malay culture. Although some argue that zapin originates from Arab culture, the hundreds of years of hybridity have made it Malay, along with the silat which is identifiably Malay. In this case, hybridity functions more as an umbrella for innovation and progress through its attempt to experiment with the

<sup>66</sup>Jähnichen, Gisa. "Renovation versus Formalization in zapin Music?:Some Remarks on the Recent meaning of Maqam in the Malay World." *Muqam in and outside Xinjiang, China*. Edited by Jürgen Elsner and Gisa Jähnichen. Urumqi: Xinjiang Art Photography Publishing House: 209-228, 2009, p.211

<sup>67</sup>Alfirafindra, *Op. Cit*

<sup>68</sup>Ibrahim, Zawawi. *Disciplining Rock Music and Identity Contestations: Hybridization, Islam and New Musical Genres in Contemporary Malaysian Popular Music*. No. 18. Working Paper, 2015, p.15

<sup>69</sup>Nor, Mohd Anis Md. "Writing On Hybridity: Re-Exerting Ownership Through Dance Writing In Malaysia." *Dancing Mosiac: Issues in Hybridity*, 2011, p. 314

freedom in creation which is featured in every masterpiece. This is executed by integrating aesthetic values from every element and producing a new and characterized form of masterpiece.

### **The Choreography Creation of Gema Silapin**

The choreography creation of Gema Silapin is a creation of the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University in collaboration with the Sutera Foundation, and combines silat, a form of martial arts whose movements were inspired by the movement of flora and fauna, and zapin, which is a genre of Malay dance and music, popular especially in Johor. The costumes for the dance is quite different from other Malay dances which are typically gold and shimmering.<sup>70</sup>

Gema Silapin is not categorized as a modern dance, but more of a newly revamped traditional dance. This means that the traditional elements inherited from zapin and silat are maintained but some new elements are added. The maintained elements include music and movements, which in turn, is the core of zapin and silat. The rationale of maintaining the traditional elements until now is to not to leave behind tradition, but rather promote it to society.<sup>71</sup>

### **Gema Silapin**

Gema Silapin is a dance prologue that presents Silat and Zapin concurrently. All dancers enter the stage by greetings. Initially, the male dancers sit with their legs crossed and their backs facing the audience as they watch the female dancers dancing, with the gamelan orchestra in the back playing the solo the stringed instrument (taksim). After the taksim, the male dancers rise and join the female dancers with the rhythm of the stringed instruments and marwas. All dancers then stoop down and become quiet as the orchestra starts playing flute, which is a musical instrument commonly used for accompanying silat. After that, the stringed instrument resumes playing continuously and dancers will dance again and turn towards the audience.<sup>72</sup> A variety of movements are shown including showing respect, silat, *buka panggung*, and zapin movements.

### **My Hero**

My Hero is an element of silat from Gema Silapin. The men face one another and dance battle (face off) in groups. These men are divided into three groups; one group wears red with gold trim, another group is dressed in blue and the other group is dressed in green. Meanwhile, the women dance with piercing movements using their hair pins as weapons. Then, they reinsert the hair pins into their hair buns with a movement that reflects strength and grace, rolling forward without damaging their hair. Although demonstrating martial arts, movements in My Hero focuses on the beauty of the movements and demonstrates almost no physical contact at all. This is exemplified by the movement of the finger poking the air and how the men are quiet and at the ready in a circle. Although *songket* is a sign of victory in a martial arts fight, none of the groups use or get *songket*.

### **Pusaran Zapin**

Pusaran or Rotating zapin prioritizes various aspects of zapin in a Malay's daily life, with zapin from Johor as a medium. Malay traditional music is added with cymbals, sinh sound

<sup>70</sup>Hijjas, B. "Artistic, Not Martial, Malay Dance." Last Edited 2015, Accessed July 14, 2016, <https://kldancewatch.wordpress.com/2015/09/17/1552/>

<sup>71</sup>Farida, L. 2015. "Gema Silapin Rawvideo". Sep 10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrlXcDJL0YI>

<sup>72</sup>Karim, Ejat. "The stringed instrument/Oud for Gema Silapin." 2015, Oct 17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o29pCMTGtQ>

and lightning tube, which are modern musical instruments. Rotating zapin is the most narrative part that tells the story of how life is ups and downs and challenges that lead to the one destiny. Rotating zapin begins with village dances by dancers dressed in ground batik. The female dancers perform movements that are gender neutral, using poses with legs astride and kicking movements. This dance shows the dancers in line, with a mixture of gender, each holding shawls from dancers in front of them.<sup>10</sup> Then, the dance is continued with men dancing wearing caps. The dancers initially come in a mixed group of about 10 females and five males, that later concentrates to the middle and breaks away to form three rows, each consisting of five people, with the middle row consisting of males, who line up away from the audience. The dancers then demonstrate silat movements followed by greetings. Next, they demonstrate movements as if they were separated from other members. Two males, in the far left and far right position, pull the female dancers positioned in the far right and far left as well, while three other male dancers remain in the middle. Therefore, they now form five groups. A group of three males and two male-female couples merge into the center circle with seven members, while the other two groups of females, each consisting of four dancers move to the left and right. Upon entering the splitting movement again, one female dancer from the middle group runs to the back of the stage, leaving one female to be surrounded by five male dancers. At first, they perform different movements, with the males more actively moving around the woman. Later on, these six dancers perform the same dance again with the group of females silently witnessing. In the end, the four male dancers separate into each of the two groups of females, and leaving one pair of male and female in the middle. All dancers eventually merge to form concentric circles with a circle of male dancers in the middle.<sup>73</sup>

In the end, a dance is performed by dancers in white and green robes with the females wearing headbands. The significance of the female dancers wearing headbands is to show that the wearing of the headbands does not limit the dance. The female dancers' movements are more restricted in this segment compared to the batik segment. This is due to their social norms rather than physical reasons. One hand of the female dancer is placed on the waist, reflecting more conventional female dance. Meanwhile, the male dancers move with both hands free. There are parts where females and males dance together. In this section, there is a movement in which three females surround one male to hold the hem of the male's garment.

### **The Choreography Creation of Gema Silapin as Form Hybridity**

The prologue of Gema Silapin reflect the movements and music of Zapin. This is indicated by the entry of the dancers in two rows into the stage and greeting at taksim that is committed by a single 'ud (a stringed instrument) player.<sup>11</sup> Silat elements come in the form of flute performance. The flute is a woodwind instrument which has been famous as an accompaniment for martial arts, such that every melodic movement shows the speed and movement of the silat dancers.<sup>12</sup> When the flute is played after the stringed instrument and marwas, the dancers pause to listen to the flute. This movement can be interpreted as a movement of respect, as a marker of the inclusion of the flute into the performance. That is, rather than the dancers showing movements of martial arts, they make another show of respect, after the first instance done towards the accompaniment of the stringed instrument. This reflects that in Gema Silapin, both elements of Zapin and silat are maintained separately. Therefore, we do not see the dancers performing silat with a stringed instrument or performing with the accompaniment of the flute.

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<sup>73</sup>Sutra Foundation. "UPSI." Jul 8, 2015. <https://www.Youtube.com/watch?v=sfdYPEYXvSY>

In *My Hero*, the flute becomes dominant and the dancers perform silat. The interesting yet attractive is how the choreographer chose dancers dressed in red with gold trim as one group of male dancers. Visual association that immediately arises is the similarity between these dancers and the Chinese lion dancers.<sup>11</sup> Red is the color that is rarely associated with Malays, but more so with the Chinese. The Chinese like red because it is the color of luck. Malays favor blue and yellow more. They associate themselves more with yellow and blue for those two colors are the colors of royalty, each repectively associated with a triumph (yellow) because it is a color that approximates the color of gold, which is to only be used by the king, and courage in the waters (blue), reflecting the Malay history as a maritime nation. The battle between the blue and red in *My Hero* can be interpreted as a reflection of the ethnic problems between the Malays and the Chinese.

Even more impressive, this fight does not produce a winner and the dancers re-unite and cooperate. The value of this dance is considered deep in inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia which is at times in a tense situation. Here, the choreographer gives the message that ethnic diversity in Malaysia today is not a source of division but instead a source of unity in development. Whether or not known by the choreographer, this is the most priceless aspect of martial dance in *Gema Silapin*.

Entering back into the world of *Zapin*, the narrative is given to emphasize the storytelling nature in the dance. The language used is not quite clear, but it is certain that it is not Malay or Arabic, but is an Austronesian language group more to the east, probably from the East Malaysia region. Therefore, we again see the cultural hybridity in *Gema Silapin*. From the story itself, the three-phase Rotation *Zapin* truly reflects the stages of human life. The gender neutral dance performed at the beginning is a reflection of childhood in human life, when males and females played together. Hence it can be seen that the dancers perform movements cheerfully and actively. Moving on, dances with the typical Malay clothing reflect the children having entered adolescence. In adolescence and early adulthood, the dancers begin to choose a spouse and indicate their gender identity. From the number of female dancers, only one of which is taken to be contested by the male dancers. It is hard to resist the sexual interpretation of this movement. This dance reflects the process of sexual selection that occurs in human society everywhere, not only in Malay. In life, a beautiful woman or a woman who meets the general criteria favored by men would be selected to then be contested by the men, so that ultimately the winner gets a partner as husband and wife. After several attempts, finally a man is chosen by the woman to become her spouses and the dance finally resumes with the other dancers rejoining, entering the next stage.

The next stage is the last stage in the life cycle of humankind, which is the religious stage. In this dance, the husband and wife have entered society and start focusing on the afterlife. Therefore, the male dancers wear white and green robes which are the colors of purity and those typically associated with Islam. It is also emphasized in the women wearing headscarves, signifying that headscarves or hijab have been worn. From this point forward, movement becomes softer and it reflects the entry of the dancers into old age, finally entering the spiritual stage of life in preparation to face death. The situation at the previous stages becomes the opposite here. During the stage of adolescence or early adulthood, a female dancer is surrounded by five males, but here, a male dancer is surrounded by three female dancers. This movement can be understood in the context of more general patriarchy or more specifically, the context of polygamy in Islam. In the context of patriarchy, men are seen as heads of families, leaders, and are most able to manage the household. In the context of Islam, men are seen as the leader who guides the family in life and the prosperous hereafter and they have the right to marry up to four women, as long as the men are able to be fair and not forceful. In this spiritual stage, *zapin* is brought into its alternative context, which in certain communities is a form of religious chanting. As reported by Nor,

Naqshabandiyah congregations use Zapin as a medium to remember Allah, through the emphasis of the spiritual essence of monotheism.<sup>11</sup>

The alternative interpretation of Rotation Zapin can be made, as reported by Hijjas.<sup>11</sup> Hijjas interprets that Rotation is an overview of the evolution of Zapin. This hypothesis states that Zapin starts from the rural areas, hence dressed in dark clothing, then in the Malay neighborhood, and finally in an Islamic revivalist environment. This interpretation is good to make sense of the development of general Malay life from the isolated traditional society into a society that accepts Islam ritualistically and finally reaching a revival in modern times. Even so, if this is considered as an evolution of Zapin, obviously this interpretation is wrong. Instead, Zapin is actually the opposite. In traditional societies, such as congregations of Naqshabandiyah, Zapin is a means of remembrance, so that it is significantly more spiritual. Arabic Zapin, as the origin of Malay Zapin, was originally a tool for spreading Islam. Therefore, Zapin was only danced by males and done in the mosque. After its development, Zapin is no longer associated with religion but more on the value of art and entertainment, performed by both genders and not bound to a particular place.

Overall, until the end, we see that Gema Silapin blends Zapin and silat in a Hegelian way, by maintaining the essence of each element without blending them into something new. As a result, the identity of these two elements remain visible. A synthesis like this has a strong replication at the national level. Malaysia's multicultural policies segregate ethnic identity of every race so that each is maintained and provides variety in Malaysian culture. Therefore, we can clearly see the Malay, Chinese and Indian identity in a unity of culture, that is the culture of Malaysia. The synthesis is different from the synthesis of Marxian models that combine elements to create a new identity, such as in Indonesia. In Indonesia, the ethnic identity of a person is more obscure, whether he is Javanese, Chinese, and Malay, as they married interracially in the process of acculturation. Even so, the ethnic identity at the collective level is maintained through adherence to the residence. Hence, Chinese dancers can dance Javanese dances when they are in Java, and so on.

The influence of paradigm thinking in building the hybridity of the masterpiece in a collective level which is seen in Gema Silapin dance needs to be appreciated highly. Hybridity which occurs is in accordance with its original commitment to lift dance and traditional music as something to be revived, rather than renewed. However, there are risks in this effort. Because Zapin and silat are maintained so that they do not merge into one, there is a discontinuity in the dance presentation. Gema Silapin dance is seen as two dances combined in one show with careful placement, rather than a complete dance from beginning to end. It's hard to see the bridge between My Hero and Rotation Zapin, because both are talking about two different things.

Hybridity emerges from a variety of cultural contact, either because through coercion, voluntarily, or being sought actively.<sup>11</sup> We see that Gema Silapin is a form of hybridity that appears voluntarily because of a desire to illustrate the Malaysian culture in an international context while not leaving behind the identity of Malays as the main ethnicity in Malaysia. In an effort to achieve this, creativity is raised and innovation is freely produced and yields positive results. Certainly, these results cannot be separated from the cultural identity of the choreographer, the relative proportions of what is hybridized, the purpose of hybridization, and the implications for the audience who enjoy hybrid forms.<sup>11</sup> Cultural identity of the choreographer is a mix of Malay-Chinese ethnicity (at least judging from his name, Abdul Hamid Chan) and the publisher is Chinese, Lim Siew Ling. Therefore, we see the softer elements of Chinese culture, the clothes of silat dancers, which in turn become elements that gives significances in the hybridity of Gema Silapin, apart from the main hybrid elements: Silat and Zapin. The proportion of Silat and Zapin is almost balanced, Zapin is a little more than Silat. But this is natural because Zapin has a more melodic rhythm

and the meaning of the art is more viscous than silat, which is basically martial arts and has the solo accompaniment of a musical instrument (flute). The purpose of hybridization is to promote the genuine culture of Malaysia without losing the identity of that culture, and the result is a Hegelian synthesis which maintains the integrity of each of the elements, but combines them through bridges connecting the two elements. Implications for the audience watching this hybrid form is surely an assortment as Gema Silapin is not displayed as a single dance, but combined with dances from other countries. International audiences may see this as a purely artistic work with a high level of complexity, that combines folk dance and martial arts. However, a more analytical view will find elements of wisdom and strong cultural values, ranging from respect for the accompaniment in the background, knowledge in the martial arts, to the essence of human life.

Gema Silapin satisfy art analysts as well as art lovers. The drafted choreography does look too careful in maintaining the authenticity of Zapin and Silat. But for lovers of post-modern art, they are not looking for authenticity, or at least the objective and constructive authenticity.<sup>11</sup> Post-modern consumers prefer a more impressive art experience. This impressive art experience subjectively gives authenticity to art lovers, which is more valuable than the authenticity assessed objectively and constructively. Gema Silapin manages to provide such an experience. We can ask whether the art experience for a tourist will be greater if not Gema Silapin is staged, but instead only Silat or Zapin alone, or Gema Silapin synthesized in Marxian manner blending Silat and Zapin into something entirely new so that it is difficult to differentiate which elements are of Silat and which belong to Zapin. The emphasis is on experience. As long as the experience gained from enjoying the performance is satisfactory, the appreciation given is high and analysts can view it with a different perspective, for example hybridization as a form of resistance against modern culture developed in modern times, rather than as a form of conservation of the richness of Malaysian culture.

### **Conclusions**

The inter-ethnic relationship situation in Malaysia is a situation that is at times tense. Often both parties use cultural symbols to show their supremacy over the other. Cultural observers seek to eliminate these tensions through hybrid works carefully designed in order to not cause any controversy as well as to encourage the spirit of inter-ethnic cooperation. Gema Silapin is one of the works that should be appreciated. The work is a combination of Silat and Zapin presented with dance and music. This masterpiece carefully creates the hybrid of silat and Zapin so that the cultural identity of the masterpiece is preserved, but at the same time it creates a contemporary atmosphere. The music relies on the art of stringed instruments and flute music which are thick with the Malay nuances, but also the added modern components at the end of the show. Zapin dance movements construct an overview of the life of Malay society in its socio-cultural background, while dance of the silat creates a picture of peace and tolerance of values. Whether or not known by the choreographer, although Gema Silapin is an intra cultural hybrid, the values of multiculturalism remains conveyed both in the choice of musical instruments, color, movement, and narrative. It can be a question of originality, but also become a cultural pride that the Malaysians have a sense of tolerance and high adaptability in the changing global environment. Therefore, Gema Silapin is an important asset of Malaysia's works of art whereby it can be beneficial for both artists and academicians in encouraging inter-ethnic tolerance in Malaysia as well as to encourage the freedom in creation of masterpieces that meet the function of cultural preservation and aesthetic innovation.

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