

Creative Reinvention of Joget Gamelan in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Joget Gamelan dance, one of the oldest forms of dance in Malaysia. The genre is believed to be derived from court or palace traditions that began in the 17th century in Java. The 'original' repertoire is said to consist of more than 60 dances. However, as with most traditional dance forms, their knowledge has been lost through lack of documentation and practice, coupled with political and social change. Only ten dances are known today. Rather than exploring that history, this paper examines the main modes and methods of presentation that exist today. This can be broadly divided into a dance drama by specific dance repertoire within a performance. This paper investigates new trends in performance and how the dances retain their aesthetics and values that are embedded within court traditions. This paper also documents relevant strategies in performance technique and actual dance structure that have helped keep this dance genre alive in contemporary society. The fact that most courts or royal households do not play an active role in its patronage today, nor place emphasis on the dance repertoire, has required inventive thinking and choreography to breathe life and relevance into the dance form.

Keywords: Joget Gamelan, Dance drama, Dance performance, Creative Reinvention

1. INTRODUCTION: THE JOGET GAMELAN TRADITION

In Malaysia, the dance form known as Joget Gamelan once existed as a prominent performance tradition at the palaces of Pahang and Terengganu. Its performance today demonstrates an effort to uphold its traditional features and elements, albeit in the absence of patronage by the palace.

The word *gamel* is derived from the Javanese language, which means hitting. Gamelan is a set of musical instruments that features the use of percussion instrumentations such as the xylophone, metallophones, drums and gongs. In Malaysia, the *Gamelan* instrumentation or music are referred to as Malay Gamelan to differentiate it from Javanese or Balinese Gamelan. The Malay Gamelan consists of instruments such as the *saron*, *baron*, *bonang*, *gambang*, *gongs* and others (Harun Mat Piah & Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986). Malay Gamelan tunes are accompanied by a dance form known as Joget Gamelan. In its heyday, Joget Gamelan was patronized by royalty, performed at the royal palace, and served as an exquisite part of entertainment in weddings and royal festivities.

According to Mohd. Ghouse Nasuruddin (1994),

Joget Gamelan is a form of court dance that is now being performed for the public. It originates from the states of Pahang and Terengganu. Currently, Joget Gamelan Terengganu is one of the court dances that still exists. However, this form is no longer being patronized by the palace. The form has been taken over by the state government as [one of] cultural troupes' and youth associations' [dance repertoire] in the state (p. 7-8, translation by Norsafini Jafar).

Joget Gamelan is believed to have originated from the *Gending* dance of the Sriwijaya Kingdom in Indonesia (Harun Mat Piah & Siti Zainon Ismail,

1986, p. 13). *Gending* dance performance was performed in the palace beginning in the 17th century, exclusively as a royal entertainment at palace events. Historically, Joget Gamelan was first performed in Malaya via royal marriages. In 1811, musical instruments similar to musical instruments available in the royal throne room of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate were brought from Riau to grace the wedding of younger sister to Bendahara Tun Ali. Bendahara Ali was captivated by the Gamelan rhythm and dance and spent much time on it. After his death, his son Bendahara Ahmad maintained the royal patronage of this dance form through a group of dancers who danced a form known as Joget Pahang.

Joget Pahang's fame and glory reached the state of Terengganu when Sultan Zainal Abidin of Terengganu married the daughter of Bendahara Ahmad. Gamelan instruments were borrowed from the Pekan palace in Pahang by the Maziah palace in Terengganu. Not long after, the Sultan started his own group. Tengku Ampuan Mariam, the daughter of Sultan Ahmad, kept the Joget Pahang in Terengganu alive when she married the king of Terengganu around 1920. Eventually the Joget Pahang became neglected and its glory moved to the Maziah palace where it was revitalized under the supervision of Tengku Ampuan Mariam. This dance, eventually assimilated in Terengganu, became known as Joget Gamelan Terengganu. The Joget Gamelan remained a part of court entertainment until the Second World War.

2. THE RE-EMERGENCE OF JOGET GAMELAN

The near demise of Joget Gamelan Pahang and Terengganu was caused by the loss of court patronage and interest. The late Ahmad Omar Bin Ibrahim revived the tradition after meeting with the former Joget Gamelan court dancer Mak Nan in 1963. In 1964, when he learned of a court dance during the reign of Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alam Shah, Ahmad Omar brought Mak

Nan to teach Joget Gamelan to his dancers, which was the first instance of Joget Gamelan training out of the palace grounds. He was also able to re-group two former Gamelan musicians; Hamid Bin Abdullah (known as Pak Hamid) and Mohammad Bin Ismail (known as Pak Mat Nobat).

Mubin Sheppard¹ learned that a set of Gamelan instruments was kept by Tengku Ampuan Mariam at Istana Kolam in 1966. In 1970, Tengku Asmara Raja and Mubin Sheppard together initiated the revival of Joget Gamelan. Joget Gamelan was performed for public viewing in the Istana Kolam for the first time since 1942. The preparation for this performance took three months, during which the dancers were trained by Mak Nan, and the musicians by Pak Mat.

In 1969, Mubin Sheppard continue his effort to revitalize Joget Gamelan by bringing Gamelan Terengganu Orchestra to Kuala Lumpur to perform at the Southeast Asia Music and Drama Fiesta (*Pesta Drama dan Muzik Asia Tenggara*) organized by the University of Malaya. On 30 June to 4 July 1970, Joget Gamelan was performed at the Malay Arts Festival (*Temasya Seni Melayu*), also organized by the University of Malaya. For these performances, Ahmad Omar was requested by Tengku Asmara Raja and Mubin Sheppard to train a group of dancers and musicians in Joget Gamelan. At that time, Ahmad Omar was a dance instructor at the Culture, Youth and Sports Office in Kuala Terengganu. The formation of this group and the Joget Gamelan performance was approved by Tengku Ampuan Tengku Mariam, with the strong support of Tengku Asmara Raja. Nine female dancers between 15 and 20 years old were trained (Ahmad Omar, 2006, p. 26).

This group performed Joget Gamelan in Terengganu and Kuala Lumpur without Ahmad Omar as he continued his studies in dance at the Jakarta Institute of the Arts in 1971. In 1972, the group was taken over by the State Government of

Terengganu under the leadership of Nik Hassan Bin Nik Abdul Rahman, who was then the Chief Minister. The State Government of Terengganu funded the team and established the *Kumpulan Kesenian Setiausaha Kerajaan Terengganu* or SUKTRA (Terengganu State Government Arts Group). In 1973, Gamelan instruments kept by Tengku Ampuan Mariam were returned to Pahang and SUKTRA bought a new set of Gamelan instruments from Solo, Indonesia.

In 1975, Ahmad Omar returned to Malaysia to assist SUKTRA. During July to September 1975, he was assigned to the Department of Culture, Youth, and Sports of the State of Pahang in Kuantan, where he formed a Joget Gamelan Pahang group. In 1976, the National Cultural Troupe began to move professionally under the Arts Development Unit, Division of Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports. At this point, Joget Gamelan was being taught to the national troupe and dancers and musicians trained at the National Cultural Complex (*Kompleks Budaya Negara - KBN*).

On 4-6 September 1980, the Department of Malay Literature, National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports Malaysia co-organized the first Gamelan symposium in Malaysia. This symposium was held in UKM campus to discuss Joget Terengganu, Pahang Gamelan, and Javanese Gamelan development in Johor. Joget Gamelan was formally 'adopted' by UKM. In 1980 Mak Nan, Pak Mat Nobat, and Tengku Chik (the drummer) were invited by the National Cultural Complex to make a recording of gamelan music in Kuala Lumpur.

Around the year 1983, UKM collaborated with the State Government of Terengganu and the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports in organizing the first Malaysian Gamelan Workshop held in Terengganu. Lectures, discussion, and performances of Joget Gamelan were offered. Among the groups involved in the performances were Kuala

¹ Mubin Sheppard was the earliest researcher to reconstruct the traditional Malay court dance since Malaysia's independence (1957). This reconstruction was performed in the late 1960s with the assistance of the Ministry of Information and Culture and the National Museum. Sheppard at that time was a curator at the National Museum and collector of artifacts for the National Museum Archives. He published several books: *Taman Saujana: Dance, Drama, Music* (1969), and *Magic in Malaya* (1983).

Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), UKM, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang (USM), SUKTRA, and KBN. Since then, the art has continued to grow, with strong efforts from agencies that wish to develop Joget Gamelan, including Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), Telekom Malaysia, and Petronas.

However, in 1993, Gamelan practitioners began to focus more on the music than the dance. At that time, Mak Nan's son taught gamelan music in the institutions of higher education and arts groups in and around Kuala Lumpur. Gamelan music was also taught in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor by Tengku Hilmi Suleman Bin Tengku Abdul Halim Syah, the grandson of Tengku Ampuan Mariam.

Joget Gamelan was first introduced in formal education at the National Arts Academy (now known as National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy or ASWARA) in 1994, and specializations in the field of gamelan dance and music in ASWARA were offered. Lecturers teaching at ASWARA are Sharifah Mahani Syed Kasim, Norsiah Orphans (who was one of the dancers and is now a trainer at the Palace of Culture), and Hajjah Yaacob. When instruction in Joget Gamelan began at institutions of higher education like ASWARA, SUKTRA Terengganu and KBN were no longer available to provide performances of the Joget Gamelan repertoire. ASWARA continues its formal education in Joget Gamelan, which started in 2005. Each year dance students who wish to specialize in classical dance tradition are assessed for their competence in performing Joget Gamelan and other classical dances during their final year assessment. In addition, since 2005 the University of Malaya has held recitals in Joget Gamelan.

3. TRADITION OF BI-PERFORMANCE: DANCE DRAMA AND ORCHESTRATION

Joget Gamelan performance can be classified into three categories: (1) Joget Gamelan dance-

drama; (2) Joget Gamelan in dance-drama; and (3) Joget Gamelan as repertoire. The Joget Gamelan dance-drama is a creation and arrangement of dance repertoire which is defined by generally recognized episodic stories. The Joget Gamelan in dance-drama is a dance form accompanying a complete dance drama story performance. Harun Mat Piah and Siti Zainon Ismail (1986) noted that the choice of story is probably a complete whole (1986, p. 30). By contrast, Joget Gamelan as a repertoire occurs when one or two Joget Gamelan dances are included in any dance performance.

In the presentation of Joget Gamelan dance-drama there are four stages of performance structures. In each stage, the basic movements of Joget Gamelan are used (Table 1).

Table 1. The performance structure of Joget Gamelan in dance-drama

Stages	Movements
First stage	Creating an overture for the dance drama opening section.
Second stage	Introducing the story using the pre-determined symbol-specific according to a <i>gongan</i> cycle and the tempo of the music.
Third stage	The actual story is developed for performance.
Fourth stage	The story ended with certain indicators either using elements of dance or music (similar to a coda in a symphony).

The Joget Gamelan choreography for this dance-drama performance is accompanied by Malay Gamelan music, thus retaining its characteristics as a court dance tradition. Gamelan music accompaniment in dance-drama is important and both dance and music are interconnected dramatically. Any additional musical instruments in the Gamelan ensemble must have the appropriate role and function when accompanying the dance-drama performance.

4. REINVENTING THE JOGET GAMELAN: CURRENT SITUATION

Hobsbawm and Ranger define 'invention' as "a set of practices that can be adopted by a community. The practice is governed by the explicit and implicit rules and regulations, and have a symbolic nature and seeks to inculcate the values and specific behaviors through repetition that automatically describes connections with the past" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p.1). In sum, an invention attempts to develop continuity with the past and to cater to the needs and interests of the community involved (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 2). Reinvention in this manner responds to the current situation with regard to the form and situation of the past or is intended to strengthen through the repetition of the past.

The term 'reinvention' is based on the belief that the said tradition is a re-design or re-invention of an available tradition. This term exists with the additional 're' to the word 'invention' to signify that the tradition is constantly being reinvented from time to time according to the needs of the beholder. Reinvention of Joget Gamelan occurs whenever local choreographers re-choreographed the dance to meet performance requirements. Joget Gamelan is currently undergoing reinvention in two forms: (1) Joget Gamelan in dance-drama and (2) Joget Gamelan as a single dance repertoire.

Reinvention exists as a perceived tradition which must first be 'invented'. Only then can it become 'reinvented.' In this manner, the reinvention of Joget Gamelan by choreographers such as Baharin Ismail, Omar Ahmad, Hamzah Hamid, Zaharah Abdul Abdul Hamid and Hajijah Yaacob is an ongoing product of reinvention which stems from its invention as pioneered by Tengku Ampuan Mariam at the Istana Kolam and Istana Pekan. Joget Gamelan has thus been reinvented as repertoire, tailored to fulfill modern perfor-

mance requirements. The choreographers who reinvented Joget Gamelan learned it from Adnan Binti Abdullah (Mak Nan), who was one of the apprentices of Tengku Ampuan Mariam and trained in the dance form at both Istana Kolam and Istana Maziah. Choreographers who adopted the dance movements learned them from Mak Nan as guidelines for producing new choreography. They then applied their own creativity and appropriated the movements to suit the concept of the dance-drama.

Despite using adaptations or contemporary arrangements, the dance form retains elements of the original invention (see Figure 1). Among the dance movements that remain are the *sembah buka* and *tutup* (opening and closing performance), *duduk timpuk katak* (sitting frog-legged), *campak lenggang* (dance gait), *campak lenggang sambut gong* (dance gait in response to percussion music), *campak melayah* (dance gait at lying down posture), *mengayak* (swaying body movement), *menapak* (stepping forward with the knee bent), *geser* (shifting movement – knee bent, feet shuffling inward and outward) and *dan terisik* (dance gait with knee bent, on tiptoes with forward movement). Hajijah Yaacob as a dance educator and choreographer has named the movements found in Joget Gamelan repertoire such as in Joget Gamelan *Ayak-ayak* (the act of sieving movement) and *Timang Burung* (the act of dandling a bird)². Such naming may also be considered the choreographer's reinvention efforts to facilitate dance instruction at ASWARA. Elements such as movement acting still exist in Joget Gamelan dance-drama where the movements are done symbolically or literally in a sitting, standing, or walking position. This reflects the meaning or essence of the story, such as crying, fishing, bathing, birds flying, and fighting. Movements that were reinvented based on the story line in a dance-drama are used in the Joget Gamelan repertoire and are preserved.

² All inventive names given to the Gamelan dance forms were gleaned from face-to-face interviews with the main informant, Hajijah Yaacob during the month of June 2010. Hajijah is the third generation descendent of the lead Gamelan dancer, Mak Nan, of the Joget Gamelan Terengganu.



Figure 1. *Sembah Tutup* (closing salutation) movement in Joget Gamelan Perang Manggung reconstructed by one of the authors, Norsafini Jafar.

The revival of Joget Gamelan by Ahmad Omar and the state government of Terengganu was based on Mak Nan's memory, Tengku Ampuan Mariam's manuscript and stories was the result of Mubin Sheppard's effort. The revival process was based on Mak Nan's recollections, supplemented by secondary sources and oral histories. The existence of Joget Gamelan repertoires available in Terengganu and Kuala Lumpur in recent times is thus a testimony to reinvention. The reinventions have one thing in common: that they are based on an invention of Joget Gamelan Terengganu. Reinvention was done to provide a unique identity to each choreographer's creativity and is seen as an effort to demonstrate society's competence in preservation and conservation of the Joget Gamelan (Harun Mat Piah, 1983).

Joget Gamelan reinvention in Siti Zubaidah, Perang Garuda, and Lambang Sari dance-dramas can be traced in the form of presentation. Those were presented in the form of a complete story

and built up of a sequence from episodes. The episodes are taken and adapted from scenes in Malay *Panji* stories³, folk stories, popular or epic stories, everyday life behavior, and the world of humans and animals. They are expressions of art and aesthetics with particular functions. The most significant difference between invention and reinvention can be seen in the form of the performance. The reinvention by the choreographers, the plot of the dance-drama story was constructed prior to the arrangement of Joget Gamelan dance, whereas in the invention at Istana Kolam, the dance was choreographed in advance, then sorted and arranged to form a dance drama.

5. CONCLUSION: CULTURALLY CREATIVE MERGING OF THE FORM

The history and development of Joget Gamelan is based on the efforts of Tengku Mariam Ampuan, who pioneered the invention and reinvention of Joget Gamelan. Her work has been used as guidelines

³ *Panji* stories are classical Javanese stories which first appeared during the Kediri kingdom in Java (1042 – 1222) and eventually spread across Southeast Asia.

for contemporary choreographers in reinventing this art form through the movement design, costume design, use of props, and music composition. This reinvented Joget Gamelan has reached the level where it is accepted and embraced in contemporary Malaysian society given the changes to its content and presentation modes.

The process of change on Joget Gamelan is driven by various factors. Innovation and experimentation by local choreographers is seen as a significant development and reflects a continuation of positive invention. Any changes or creation of the dance form reflect the choreographer's passion in connecting the Joget Gamelan with the past through refining its aesthetic values.

The Joget Gamelan in a dance-drama in particular, cannot run from the elements of creation, especially in the aspect of movement vocabulary. Fresh ideas imbued with the original dance movements are mandatory in conveying the story line. Indeed, Joget Gamelan dance motifs have been given specific names to facilitate instruction. Shifts and changes to both forms cannot easily be denied, as the need to change and adapt are characters of a living community and its dynamism of culture. Even as the changes are applied to the form, fundamental elements of the Joget Gamelan such as Joget Gamelan movement principle, the use of the Malay gamelan songs, and clothing and accessories are retained in contemporary performances.

A high-quality artwork recognized by the community is often used as a reference for the creation of new works of art. Developments and changes to Joget Gamelan in dance-drama or Joget Gamelan repertoire in performance are ongoing. For example, the king as a ruling figure at that time gave less attention to the arts than to the political and economic growth of his kingdom. This led to a decline in the court dance and music tradition. If the king had em-

phasized the arts, Joget Gamelan would never have been neglected.

To reinvent Joget Gamelan which apparently occurs only in Terengganu and Kuala Lumpur, efforts to promote this art form should be improved. In addition to ASWARA, government agencies such as the National Department for the Arts and Culture (JKKM) are extensively involved in promoting this art form. For example, the *Inspitari* program⁴, which took place on 20 October 2010 at Kuala Lumpur City Hall Auditorium, indicated that the choreographical trajectory is influenced by Western elements, which may not be appropriate for fusion with Eastern elements. Movement fusions may be properly applied with the appointment of choreographers and dance educators who have sufficient knowledge of the science of reconstruction and deconstruction in reinvention discourse.

In an effort to develop Joget Gamelan, detailed studies of its dance repertoire should be performed because there are few rigorous academic studies that can serve as references for preserving and developing this art. Government organizations for handling documentation and museology, teaching and learning, and research and development are much needed to revive interest within and outside the country.

In spite of the changes and significant differences in the shape, structure, and function of the presentation, the Joget Gamelan in dance-drama as well as the Joget Gamelan repertoire remains unique. In this ongoing evolution, what is important is that the genre is appreciated and kept alive by the community.

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⁴ *Inspitari* is an annual creative and innovative program of dance organized by the National Department for Culture and Arts (JKKM) usually carried out at the end of each year.

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