

The Archive Performs:
Malay Performance Traditions as Vessels for Islamic Histories and Identities in Sumatra

Katia Chaterji

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Reading Committee:

Laurie Sears, Chair

Anand Yang

Christoph Giebel

Christina Sunardi

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Katia Chaterji

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Laurie Sears

Department of History

This dissertation explores the history of Islam in maritime Southeast Asia, focusing on the transmission of Islamic knowledge to Indonesia's island of Sumatra through pathways mobilized by the arts – journeys made possible by singing and dancing. Looking at *dakwah* (Islamic proselytization) performance generally and two Sumatran *dakwah* traditions specifically (*salawat dulang* and *zapin*), my research shows how Islamization in the Malay archipelago demanded local individual agency in the formation of Malay Islamic cultural identity. Chapter One discusses the emergence of racialized Malayness in colonial discourses that set a persistent image against which Malay artisans and their traditions were assessed; Chapter Two considers the organization of self-identifying Indonesian Islamic artists and their responses to how the arts fit into changing religious and national identities at the cusp of violent anticommunism and a

regime change in the 1960s; and Chapters Three and Four focus on the history and development of two specific *dakwah* traditions, *salawat dulang* and *zapin*, as embodied and oral traditions employed by practitioners to reflect local understandings of Islam in numerous ways. This dissertation contributes new ways of thinking about the performing arts as sites of Islamic cultural knowledge production, the permissibility of art within Islamic practice, and the global diversity of Islam not only through regional variation but also through the varying representations of Islam as performed tradition. In addressing such issues, this project engages a combined methodological approach drawing upon archival analysis, oral history, and dance ethnography to interrogate textual sources and performing bodies together. This approach brings together material from London, Jakarta, and the Indonesian provinces of West Sumatra and Riau in Sumatra.

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INTRODUCTION

*Mano sagalo niniak jo mamak
Cukuik rombongan kasadonyo
Maaf jo rila nan kami pintak
Sagalo kami anak mudo*

All the esteemed leaders
And all in the audience,
Please forgive and permit us this performance
As we are but young people

- Dendang Dayang Daini¹

The 2019 West Sumatra Qur’anic recitation competition (*Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur’an*, MTQ) opened in Solok on a Saturday evening in June, two weeks after the Idul Fitri holiday marking the end of Ramadan. It was already dark and the air hung heavy with humidity and tobacco smoke. Marked by the interlocking patterns of the *talempong* (small kettle gongs), roughly one hundred dancers flowed across the expansive green field in front of the mosque, their figures illuminated by bright white stadium lights. This *tari massal*, a large-scale group dance, was the opening performance for a spectacular three-day event that would nominate West Sumatra’s *qari* (Qur’anic reciter) to compete at Indonesia’s national Qur’anic recitation competition the following year in Padang-Padang Pariaman, the second time West Sumatra would host MTQ Nasional since the competition’s foundation in the 1940s.² A line of large barrel-shaped drums called *tabuah*

¹ This *dendang* (sung verses) is the traditional opening in *randai*, a Minangkabau folk theater tradition that engages martial arts, music, dance, and storytelling in sharing *kaba*, a traditional Minangkabau storytelling genre. *Kaba* are sometimes compared with Malay *hikayat*, though both forms employ distinct literary devices. In *randai*, *Dendang Dayang Daini* is a salutation to the audience and a request for forgiveness should the performers make mistakes or offend. Every *randai* performance must open with *dendang dayang daini*, and it is adjusted to match the tone of the selected *kaba* being told. I thank my teacher Pak Arif for sharing his knowledge of *randai* with me during my time in Padangpanjang, and Ika Hutami for workshopping an appropriate English translation of this *dendang*. For more information about *kaba*, please refer to the Glossary.

² In the 1940s, the Muslim cultural organization Nahdlatul Ulama founded Jami’iyyatul Qurro wal Huffadz (Organization of Recitation and Memorization), soon to be followed by MTQ competitions on a regional level. MTQ expanded to become a national competition in 1968 with its first contest held in Makassar, South Sulawesi. While West Sumatra continued to hold regional MTQ on a regular basis, it hosted MTQ Nasional for the first time in 1983 in Padang, the first time contestants from all across Indonesia traveled to West Sumatra to compete. The second

(Minang; Indonesian: *tabuh, bedug*), each one supported on a wooden stand, frame the front of the field closest to the audience.³ A wide cloth installation hangs in front of the mosque in the style of *rumah gadang*, the iconic Minangkabau architecture that symbolizes the curvature of a boat or the horns of a water buffalo, depending on who you ask. Flashing lights and images project onto this fabric *rumah gadang*, sometimes displaying the Muslim term of worship *Subhanallah* – “Glory be to God” – and at other times images of camels, palm trees, and figures in hooded gowns.

The dancers – the men wearing loose white tunics, sarong, and checkered cloth, and the women wearing *baju kurung* with black spandex turtlenecks underneath to cover any exposed skin – glide onto the field balancing a white ceramic plate in each hand and a candle atop their heads.⁴ A handful of female dancers hold woven baskets on their heads in place of a candle, their swooping gestures mimicking the harvesting of rice. The swift, bright notes of *talempong* contrast the slower, deep tones of the airy *saluang* (bamboo flute) and the sharp pentatonic *serunai* (bamboo reed flute), altogether creating a vibrant atmosphere of Minang traditional celebratory music fitting for the MTQ’s opening night. This *tari massal*, I am told by its choreographer and director Bun Lora,⁵

time West Sumatra hosted MTQ Nasional was in 2020 which, despite the emergence of covid-19, did in fact take place in November that year in the city of Pariaman.

³ *Tabuah*, sometimes translated as *tabuh* in Indonesian, is a large Minang drum similar in appearance and function to the Malay *beduk* and Javanese *bedug*. They are ceremonial drums suspended from wooden frames outside of mosques throughout Minangkabau lands that, when struck with wooden mallets, are used to announce the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer. Unique rhythms are employed to designate the Friday congregational prayer as well as other times of importance, such as the beginning and end of fasting during the month of Ramadan. In Java, the *bedug* is also a feature in gamelan ensembles; because of its loud and dynamic sound, it is often played to accompany dancers. Judith Becker and Anne Rasmussen discuss gamelan instrumentation and applications in worship, respectively. See: Judith Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980); Anne Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

⁴ To produce the appearance of candles en masse, a lidded tin can was filled with gasoline and a wick protruding from the lid was lit. Each flame was quite powerful and required extreme caution on the part of the dancers and plenty of advance practice.

⁵ Dr. Susas Rita Loravianti, or Bun Lora as she is called by her students at Institut Seni Indonesia-Padangpanjang. *Bun* is short for *bunda*, “mother” in Bahasa Minang, and functions similarly to *Ibu/Bu* in Bahasa Indonesia. Bun Lora was one of my mentors at ISI-Padangpanjang; I am deeply grateful to her for her support, encouragement, and kindness.

employs symbols and movements associated with traditional Minang *tari piring* and *tari lilin* to narrate the history of Islam in Minangkabau, the traditional lands belonging to the Minang people of western Sumatra.⁶ Beginning with depictions of pastoral West Sumatran life that transition into scenes of Minang matrilineal Islamic practice in the home and *surau* (Minangkabau Islamic assembly buildings),⁷ this dance production is equally impressive in its size as it is in thematic scope. Sonic and sartorial cues – the *talempong*, clothing, the ceramic *piring* balanced on twirling hands – suggest a permanence or durability of local Minang culture throughout the performance. The cloth installation behind the dancers, however, with its shifting display of hooded figures and camels walking across sand dunes studded with palm trees, adds a contrasting layer to the narrative. These projected images clearly represent a world quite far from Southeast Asia, both geographically and temporally.

The pairing of these two visual experiences – traditional Minang song and movement with silhouettes of topography and attire characteristic of the Arabian Peninsula – is an assertion of synonymy between indigenous Minang and what might be viewed as “mainstream” Muslim identities.⁸ An initial interpretation may be that the projected images of distinctly non-Minang (and non-Indonesian) peoples, animals, and topography were intended as a nod towards Islam’s “center,” suggesting an acceptance of a presumed regional hierarchy based on proximity to Mecca.

⁶ Plate dance and candle dance, respectively. Ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi, who has conducted extensive research documenting Sumatra’s musical heritage, has written that both *tari piring* and *tari lilin* have agricultural roots as forms primarily associated with celebrating or blessing that season’s harvest. See: Margaret Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra* (Baltimore, MD: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 20.

⁷ *Surau* in Minangkabau society are similar to the institution of *pesantren* in Java. They are traditional Minangkabau Islamic assembly buildings used for worship and religious instruction. The institution itself pre-dates the arrival of Islam, and many *surau* were transformed into sites of Islamic learning by prominent Sufi teachers in West Sumatra. Please see the Glossary.

⁸ The aesthetics of the Middle East, as Islam’s place of origin, hold tremendous cultural value across the Muslim world and especially in Indonesia as younger generations become attracted to different ways of “being” Muslim. For the appeal of Arab inflections on Indonesian Muslim practice, in particular in individual performance of piety at MTQ competitions, see: Anne Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

A closer reading of this scene provides an opportunity to reject the assumed center-periphery positionality that Minang Muslims (and Malay Muslims, more broadly) are subjected to. Minang dance is widely understood to be rooted in Islamic *silat* practice – martial arts that deepen spiritual growth and understanding of the world as lived and experienced – as well as in indigenous social activities such as the harvesting of rice. The promotion of *tari piring/lilin* in MTQ’s opening night can be understood as a celebration not so much of local culture’s persistence per se, but rather of local culture *as* Islamic culture – a position particularly potent at such a large and publicized event like the MTQ.⁹ Bun Lora’s dancers and musicians contributed to substantiating local culture as a critical part of Islamic identity. Beyond arguments of syncretism so frequently applied to a region like Southeast Asia, this opening event is an expression of dual, mutually reinforced identities – to be Minang or Malay means to be Muslim. It is a performance of becoming the center of Islam for themselves and from home.

Performances such as this *tari massal* are highly active sites where Islamic history and identity are written onto the bodies and movements of its performers. Much how performers themselves are in constant motion, the impact of their performance continually shapes and reacts to ideas of Islamic aesthetics in producing images of “Indonesian” Islam(s).¹⁰ This dissertation

⁹ Succeeding in Qur’anic recitation is a momentous journey for young Muslims. Students who have studied Qur’anic reading in congregation at Islamic schools “graduate” through a ceremony known in Indonesia as *khataman*. Often, the schools will invite traditional performing artists to perform in tandem with the young students reciting for their graduation ceremony. In West Sumatra, *khataman* events were a popular site for *salawat dulang* performances, a Minang oral tradition explored in Chapter Three. Neneng Lahpan discusses such performance opportunities in Sunda (West Java). See: Neneng Yanti Khozanatu Lahpan, “The Lawfulness of Music in Contemporary Indonesian Debate,” in *Research Handbook on Islamic Law and Society* (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 358.

¹⁰ “Indonesian” Islam(s) must acknowledge the diversity of local cultures across the archipelago that makes up modern-day Indonesia. Minang cultural orientations towards Islamic expression will differ from those in East Java or Central Sulawesi, for example, as the act of Islamic transmission will be locally determined. Because there are different acts of transfer across this wide geographical region, the resulting confluence of influences informing local Islam will be different. I use the term “Indonesian” Islam(s) here as an attempt to acknowledge the plurality of Islamic identity formation across a region with a shared national identity as Indonesians.

takes performing arts as “vital acts of transfer” that participate in producing, encoding, and passing down knowledge about Islamic histories in Indonesia.¹¹ It is a study of the transmission of Islam into maritime Southeast Asia through pathways mobilized by the arts – journeys made possible by singing and dancing. Looking at the space occupied by *dakwah* arts performance, arts that participate in sharing Islamic knowledge in some way, I show that conversion to Islam in Sumatra (the westernmost island in the Malay archipelago) demanded local individual agency in the formation of Malay Islamic cultural identity, agency that has in recent decades passed down to a generation with new ideas about modern Muslim identity. Through this work, I seek to offer new ways of thinking about the performing arts as sites of Islamic cultural knowledge production, the permissibility of art within Islamic practice, and the global diversity of Islam not only through regional variation but more importantly through the varying representations of Islam as performed tradition. This is a dissertation about historical representation and memory; above all, it is about the value of art and performance as sites with agency to imagine, create, and pass down history.

Preliminary Definitions

With a long history of migration across the Indian Ocean, maritime Southeast Asia is unique in the cultural negotiation of religion and social practices.¹² Sumatra, which encountered Islam earlier than the rest of the region, provides a critical study of Malay culture at the cusp of

¹¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, A John Hope Franklin Center Book (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2–3.

¹² Since 1985, scholars have written histories of the Indian Ocean as a thriving, self-sustained macro-region long before European intervention, mobilized by trade and religious networks. See K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands below the Winds*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean, Seas in History* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003).

such transformation.¹³ This project explores representations of Islam and cultural identity by various actors in search of a nuanced understanding of the lived and performed conditions of religion. It begins with questioning colonial misrepresentations of Malay peoples and culture that left a long-lasting impression of Malays as lacking in strong cultural traditions and religious conviction. Such depictions blatantly disregard the close relationship between Islam and the arts within Malay communities in Sumatra and erases the depth of Islam already in place when such accounts were written. Malay Muslim artists are motivated to create space for themselves and the history of their arts practice out from under the shadow of colonialism, seen in particular in the following chapter with a closer look at modernist Muslim cultural organizations that contributed to Indonesian Islamic artistic identity and permissible practice in the 1960s. The second half of this project highlights two particular *dakwah* arts traditions from Sumatran Malay cultures that substantiate local Islam in unique ways.

The following sections address my scholarly interventions as I see and understand them, comment on methodological choices made in researching and writing this dissertation, acknowledge intellectual inspirations that helped birth this interdisciplinary project, and discuss the dissertation's chapters. To do this, it is important to first establish some early definitions that are useful in understanding the ideas and questions behind this dissertation.

Malay/Malayness

This dissertation is a study of Malay identities as expressed through the realms of performing arts and religion. Yet this term – *Malay* – raises many questions that challenge a

¹³ M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 3rd ed. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); For further study of Malay Islam through Acehnese literature, see James T. Siegel, *Shadow and Sound: The Historical Thought of a Sumatran People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

singular, location-based understanding of the term, one that has its roots in European imperialism. The British colonial project in Southeast Asia relied heavily upon the production of new scholarship on and about the colonies. This colonial scholarship included a field which scholar Hendrik Maier has termed “Malayistics.”¹⁴ The term “Malay,” though often used as the English translation of “Melayu,” is intertwined with the colonial appropriation and political reinterpretation of the term up until the present day. It has become a politicized term that in some cases assumes Islamic religious identity and a particular legal status. In recent decades, however, scholars of Southeast Asia have carefully reexamined the construct of “Malay” in order to understand its historical evolution and continued cultural significance in the world today.¹⁵ Instead of being understood as a monolithic term of religion or ethnicity (with clear “primordial” values and a geographically located “center” along the Malay Peninsula), “Malay” is now increasingly understood as a more diverse and inclusive construct that transcends present-day international borders and assumptions of universal conformity.

The decision to utilize the term “Malay” over “Melayu” in this dissertation was a challenging one. “Melayu” provides an opportunity to lift some of the obscurity and political tensions that exist as a result of colonial imperial projects in Southeast Asia. In this project, however, I chose to employ the term “Malay,” despite the potential for colonial entanglements (and perhaps at times because of this), as it is an important reminder that the term has a complicated past that threads between colonial encounters. “Malay” is also more widely used in English-

¹⁴ Hendrik M. J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, Studies on Southeast Asia (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988).

¹⁵ See: Leonard Y. Andaya, “The Search for the ‘Origins’ of Melayu,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 315–30; Maier, *In the Center of Authority*; Anthony Milner, *The Malays: The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009); Anthony Reid, “Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 295–313.

language scholarship, so this choice reflects my hope to make this dissertation accessible for my intended audience.

I frequently employ the term “Malayness” as well. This concept arises from Anthony Milner who joins others like Leonard Andaya in advocating for a shift away from “Malay” as a singular, monolithic category. Milner proposes “Malayness” as an alternative term suggesting an open, flexible, and at times vulnerable construct that is constantly changing.¹⁶ Malayness, for Milner, takes on a “civilizational” (though perhaps “cultural” is better suited to avoid equation with Samuel Huntington’s framing of civilizations) quality that invokes dynamic shifts in mindsets and even geographies. Malay, on the other hand, is locked into the more stable and secure position of ethnicity and assumes the existence of “the true Malay,” an authentic form of ethnic identity that has proven contentious – this troubling essentializing narrative is visible in the colonial materials explored in Chapter One, but it continues in Southeast Asia’s modern nations like Malaysia, where legal and political rights are attributed based on race. Conceptualizing Malayness enables scholars to cross the boundaries of the nation-state and regional categories imposed by area studies to understand the role of Malay peoples and cultures in greater Southeast Asia and in diaspora.

It is with this understanding of Malay that I use the geographical term Malay archipelago to designate the islands of Southeast Asia. This region is sometimes called the Indonesian archipelago – yet I avoid this term to reduce the likelihood of superimposing modern national and political boundaries upon the peoples and traditions I discuss. Occasionally, the colonial materials I referenced engage the term Indian archipelago, a term that I also avoid unless I am quoting original phrasing. Viewing this region as the Indian archipelago is a continuation of scholarship

¹⁶ Milner, *The Malays: The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific*.

that positions Southeast Asia as “Greater India,” always in relation to and being influenced by South Asia, where Britain located the seat of its empire.

This dissertation cannot address all the difficulties that surround defining and engaging with the term Malay. Yet one of the values of focusing on the arts is that performance offers significant potential in expanding what Malay/Malayness may signify for its stakeholders. The range of possibilities in Malay performance traditions perhaps speaks to the very fluidity of the term itself.

Dakwah

At the core of this dissertation are performing arts forms that claim the label of *dakwah*, arts that are Islamic in function and nature. The Arabic word *da'wa* (دعوة), from the classical root meaning “to call” or “to invite,” is most often translated as proselytization or propagation of the faith.¹⁷ Yet *dakwah* does not necessarily indicate conversion amongst non-Muslims – in fact, *dakwah* reflects a process of sharing information about Islam that may encourage individual conversion, perhaps, but more likely to “[summon] other Muslims to correct forms of belief.”¹⁸ And because the means through which individuals preached about Islam varied tremendously from region to region, the assumed symmetry between conversion events and wider Islamization remains problematic. It suggests the troubling assumptions that surround Islam as primarily a missionary faith over one of introspective personal faith.

Dakwah refers simultaneously to the propagation of the faith (i.e., conversion) and the strengthening of Islamic faith amongst already pious Muslims. Employed as a guide for living by

¹⁷ M. Canard, “Da’wa,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P.J. Bearman, Marc Garborieau, and Brill Academic Publishers (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁸ Andrew C. S. Peacock, *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2017), 5.

Islamic principles and morality, *dakwah* is applied to art forms that play a part in deepening Islamic faith through the incorporation of practical knowledge (when to pray, how to say the *syahadat* declaration of faith, etc.) and theological knowledge (verses from the Qur'an and their meaning, etc.). The *dakwah* arts as they are discussed in this dissertation refer to those art forms with histories associated with early moments of introducing Islam to the region as well as a continuing role and relevance in negotiating religious meaning and legitimizing long Islamic histories for today's Muslim communities. The term "*dakwah* arts" does not merely refer to art produced by Muslims. Its significance runs deeper to engage with the core principles of Islam. They may employ aesthetics that are deemed "Islamic," but they maintain their relevance because of their ability to intentionally convey religious and cultural meaning. In prioritizing *dakwah* arts, I explore the ways in which the production and performance of Islamic piety influences the formation of Islamic history and identity in Sumatra.

Scholarly Interventions

This dissertation contributes to three ongoing scholarly conversations. It is an application of an Indian Ocean world history perspective within Indonesian historiography, an invitation to broaden source materials within studies of Islam, and an exploration of performance – and the body – as historical archive.

Indonesian Studies, an Indian Ocean Lens

In her presidential address to the 2006 conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Barbara Andaya explains that the sea is more often seen as a boundary, as an unknown entity that separates inhabitants of land from inhabitants of other lands. Many communities perceive, or have

perceived at one point in time, the crossing of such uncertain waters as forbidden, treacherous, and even polluting.¹⁹ The world's geo-political division along national lines since the mid-20th century has further emphasized a land-based orientation to define a nation, often to the exclusion of those who exist at the periphery zones, borderlands, or live in sea-dwelling communities. Yet the Indian Ocean world is a region with a long, interconnected history since the 7th century facilitated through trade, migration, and the spread of ideas.²⁰ It is, as Sunil Amrith writes, a place that enjoys a “shared past divided into the separate compartments of national histories.”²¹

Approaching Southeast Asia from its waters opens a possibility to break past arbitrary political delineations of space to consider an ocean and its surrounding region connected through the migration of people, material, and ideas. Southeast Asia was a critical point of contact within Indian Ocean circuits, known and referenced in Arab navigational texts as “the lands below the [monsoon] winds,” descriptions that persists in the Malay language today.²² Prioritizing the functions of an Indian Ocean world of exchange challenges narratives of Indian or Middle Eastern domination over Southeast Asia, of cultural influence radiating out of, but not into, these “lands above the winds.” This project specifically centers Sumatra, the western-most island of the Malay

¹⁹ Barbara Watson Andaya, “Oceans Unbounded: Transversing Asia across ‘Area Studies,’” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 4 (2006): 673.

²⁰ Economic historian K.N. Chaudhuri considered the Indian Ocean as both a physical and a human unit, and his 1985 book serves as the first Braudelian history written about the Indian Ocean. Chaudhuri’s sweeping history looks primarily at patterns in trade to determine whether regional and temporal coherence (a common destiny) was a reality for this ocean-scape. See: K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean : An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²¹ Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal : The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1.

²² In Ahmad ibn Majid’s navigational treatise known by its simplified title the *Fawa’id* (c. 1489-1490 CE), the regions to the west of Cape Comorin (known today as Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, India) are described as “above the winds” and those east of it as “beneath the wind,” phrasing that persists in the Malay language (*di atas angin* and *di bawah angin*). The role of Arab navigational texts is explored further in Chapter One. See: G. R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese, Being a Translation of Kitāb al-Fawā’id Fī Usūl al-Bahr Wa’l-Qawā’id of Ahmad b. Mājīd al-Najdī*, Oriental Translation Fund (Series) ; v. 42 (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971).

archipelago that provided crucial points of contact for travelers seeking to navigate through the Sunda Strait or the Strait of Melaka. Focusing on Islamic arts traditions of Sumatra expand the discussion of transregional connectivity that makes Indian Ocean studies so valuable to consider how Islam was locally constituted by and for Malay Muslim peoples.

Sumatra is also a place that has been explored far more by anthropologists than by historians or dance scholars.²³ Within historical Indonesian scholarship, Javanese and Balinese histories are more frequently represented than other parts of the archipelago. In resisting the centripetal pull of Java and Bali, this project expands scholarly understandings of Southeast Asian histories to include Sumatra, the sixth-largest island in the world and home to approximately 50 million Indonesians.

While scholarly interest in Sumatran music may be traced to the 1930s, few comprehensive studies exist to document the arts in Sumatra. In 1930, the well-known Dutch ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst took an interest in the traditional music of West Sumatra and the island of Nias located off the west coast of Sumatra.²⁴ Art historian Claire Holt, along with Rolf de Maré, filmed and documented dances in Nias and Batakland in 1939.²⁵ While valuable contributions to the musical archives of Indonesia, these examples from Sumatra were sparse in comparison with the breadth of scholarship conducted in Java and Bali. Margaret Kartomi's 2012 *Musical Journeys in Sumatra* was therefore groundbreaking as the first book-length study of traditional musical arts in Sumatra.

²³ Barbara and Leonard Andaya are notable exceptions as prominent historians of the Malay world. Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb : Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree : Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Andaya, "The Search for the 'Origins' of Melayu."

²⁴ Maya Frijn, Sandra Reijnhart, and Andrew Baxter, eds., *Indonesian Music and Dance: Traditional Music and Its Interaction with the West. A Compilation of Articles (1935-1952) by Jaap Kunst Originally Published in Dutch* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute/Tropenmuseum and University of Amsterdam/Ethnomusicology Centre "Jaap Kunst," 1994).

²⁵ Claire Holt, "Dances of Sumatra and Nias: Notes by Claire Holt," *Indonesia* 11, no. 11 (1971): 1–20; Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967).

Based on several decades of research since the 1970s, this comprehensive study provides critical documentation of indigenous ritual arts alongside art forms with more Islamic devotional content, or “Islamic flavor” in Kartomi’s terms (*yang bernafaskan Islam*).²⁶ Ethnomusicologist Jennifer Fraser has more recently continued the study of Sumatran arts through her work on the packaging and commercialization of ethnicity in West Sumatra seen in modern pop music.²⁷

In addition to ethnomusicologists, anthropologists have taken an interest in Sumatra. Kenneth George’s intimate work with Sumatran Acehnese painter A. D. Pirous engages with the question of Islamic art, specifically what constitutes art as Islamic and who can claim Islamic identity in the eyes of the nation and the world. Pirous presents his paintings as Islamic art, making space within the study of Islamic art to discuss and make sense of current events in Indonesia and especially in Aceh.²⁸ George’s *Picturing Islam* demonstrates that Pirous’ artistic renderings of Islamic and Acehnese identity through the arts brings together the ways in which Islam and Indonesia are seen, practiced, and interwoven together. Pirous’ work is discussed further in Chapter Two.

Anthropologist James Siegel’s *The Rope of God*, based on fieldwork conducted in the 1960s, discusses Islam in Aceh not through the arts but through structures and technologies of control in society and in the family.²⁹ In tracing the evolution of Islam in Aceh, Siegel reveals how Muslim and familial identities unified and mobilized Acehnese society from the colonial period until the present, a study that retains significance in Indonesia today as the nation continues to negotiate its relationships with religion and religious institutions. The late Mary Steedly, in her

²⁶ Margaret J. Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 13.

²⁷ Jennifer A. Fraser, *Gongs and Pop Songs: Sounding Minangkabau in Indonesia*, Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).

²⁸ Kenneth M. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA, Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 140.

²⁹ James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

anthropological study of the Karo Batak area of North Sumatra during the first three years of the Indonesian Revolution between 1945-48, centers the stories and memories of women who lived through the struggle for independence.³⁰ Rather than a history of independence as seen from the perspectives and actions of male revolutionaries, Steedly illuminates the ordinary, everyday experiences of women living in a region far removed from the presumed “center” of political action. Her work is especially poignant in balancing the memories of her interlocutors of the revolutionary period with the very different ideological climate of the late-New Order when she conducted her interviews. From the perspective of history, the late Jeffrey Hadler contributed to scholarly attention on Sumatran ways of life in his work on the Minangkabau matrilineal cultural system in West Sumatra, an ethnic group well known for their Islamic piety. Examining the period from the late 1700s until the 1930s, Hadler argues that the resilience of this matrilineal system is a powerful example of the flexibility and diversity of social and religious thought in West Sumatra.³¹

Historian Jean Taylor writes that Indonesia’s Islamic past is “a heritage of stories, legends, and traditions.”³² The Malay world of Sumatra is strongly linked to this intangible heritage due to its close association with the first Islamic sultanates and the dearth of tangible cultural heritage contributing to Malay memory construction. Unlike neighboring Java, where monumental temples and reliefs play an active role in Javanese collective memory, the visual arts in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula are less visible. Scholarship on Malay literature, as a result, is a vibrant field. Literary scholars Hendrik Maier and Amin Sweeney focus on Malay and Indonesian oral and

³⁰ Mary Steedly, *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³¹ Jeffrey Hadler, *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009).

³² Jean Gelman Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 75.

textual traditions, and their work is especially important in discerning the breadth of texts, their intersections in the Malay world, and the notion of “Malay literature” itself.³³

My project responds to these trends in scholarship on Indonesia in that it not only diversifies understandings of Islam by situating Islam within Malay artistic traditions, but it also expands disciplinary scholarship on Sumatra by combining source materials from archives, interviews, and ethnographic participant-observation.

Islamic Studies

This research also maintains relevance to larger Islamic studies by folding in local narratives of conversion and ongoing religious negotiation from Sumatra. There are various interpretations of Islamic legal structures throughout the Muslim world, and questions are frequently raised about how Muslims make sense of Islam today in relation to its classical tradition of Sunni legal thought after the 10th century (out of which modernist theories of law developed).³⁴ Many scholars discuss how Islam was constructed and reconstructed over time in response to new encounters into the modern era, and they make note of the negative legacy of Western discourse on Islam that minimized Islamic contributions to legal and philosophical thought.³⁵ Within studies of Islam, however, Southeast Asian Islam is further relegated to a lesser form of Islamic practice.

³³ Hendrik M. J. Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing*, Verhandelingen van Het Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde ; 215 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004); Amin Sweeney, *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

³⁴ Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014).

³⁵ Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 5 (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); R. Michael Feener and Mark Cammack, “The Islamic Legal System in Indonesia,” *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 21, no. 1 (2012): 13–42; Clark Lombardi, *State Law as Islamic Law in Modern Egypt : The Incorporation of the Sharī‘a into Egyptian Constitutional Law*, Studies in Islamic Law and Society, v. 19 (Leiden ; Boston: BRILL, 2006); Arzoo Osanloo, “Women and Criminal Law in Post-Khomeini Iran,” in *Inside the Islamic Republic : Social Change in Post-Khomeini Iran*, ed. Mahmood Monshipouri (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91–112.

Such tendencies reflect Orientalist depictions of South and Southeast Asian Islam as “syncretic” and inauthentic due to cultural hybridity, portraying those in the eastern Indian Ocean as passive consumers of knowledge emerging from western regions. In an ethnographic report of a Javanese village in 1960, Clifford Geertz details the combined animism, Hinduism, and Islam that make up Javanese spiritual and religious systems in a “typical” village.³⁶ While *The Religion of Java* is a rich example of the thick description for which Geertz is best known, this work argues that to consider Java as Muslim would be to overlook the syncretic nature of religious life shared widely amongst central and east Javanese peoples. Colonial historiography and archaeology of Southeast Asia coming out of Europe in the interwar period, particularly by French scholar George Coedès, popularized concepts of “Indianized kingdoms” and “Greater India” in situating Southeast Asia.³⁷ This argument is the source of Edward Said’s influential claim that to contrast Islam with the image of a more peaceful, and thus harmless, Hindu and Buddhist India was an essential strategy of colonial domination.³⁸ In the case of the Southeast Asian archipelago, such representations (and misrepresentations) of Islam effectively denied its early existence in the region.

Scholarship in recent decades has challenged this unidirectional understanding of influences on Southeast Asia. Literary scholars and historians discuss a duality of religious participation in the diasporic Islamic world. Ronit Ricci argues that through interactions (i.e. translations and conversions) that take place between the standardized Arabic language and various regional Arabicized languages, Muslims can exist within the larger community of Islam while

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

³⁷ George Coedès, *Histoire Ancienne Des États Hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient* (Hanoi: Imprimeri d’Extrême-Orient, 1944); Kwa Chong-Guan, *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India: An Anthology of Articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society*, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series 10 (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

³⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed edition (New York: Vintage, 1979).

simultaneously remaining at home (the Arabicized vernacular).³⁹ Nancy Florida's analysis of the 19th century Javanese *Babad Jaka Tingkir* has shown that the Islamization of Java revolved around local understandings and demands for authority, establishing Java and Mecca as equally in possession of Islamic authority.⁴⁰ Confronting the long-standing assumption that Southeast Asia practices an incomplete form of Islam, the possibility of dual participation legitimates Southeast Asian conversions to Islam and restores cultural and religious agency to Southeast Asia in mapping the Malay and Indian Ocean worlds.⁴¹ Similarly, law historians Michael Feener and Mark Cammack discuss the groundedness of Islam within Indonesia's nationalist rhetoric and the diversity of Islamic scholarship in Indonesia that contributes to ongoing debates and discussions of Islamic law and *fiqh* (a person's individual interpretation of the meaning of God's law) that illustrates local understandings of Islamic practices.⁴²

My project draws inspiration from such efforts to recognize the strength of Islam in Southeast Asia in shaping cultural knowledge production, and especially from focused studies of religion and the performing arts. In highlighting representations of Islam in Malay performance traditions, this dissertation adds to academic trends to demonstrate that archipelagic Muslims were in conversation with the aesthetics and cultural heritage of the wider Islamic world as well as integrated into regional and national debates over identity formation. This relationship shows that

³⁹ Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*, South Asia across the Disciplines (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2011), 179.

⁴⁰ Nancy K. Florida, *Writing the Past, Inscripting the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java*, 1995.

⁴¹ See also: Pierre-Yves Manguin et al., *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia : Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series ; 2 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies ; New Delhi, 2011); Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands below the Winds*; Laurie J. Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Taylor, *Indonesia*.

⁴² Feener and Cammack, "The Islamic Legal System in Indonesia"; R. Michael Feener, "Muslim Legal Thought in Indonesia: Introduction and Overview," in *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*, ed. R. Michael Feener and Mark Cammack (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13–26.

those who became Indonesians in 1945 were, and still are, active participants in constructing Muslim identity both within the Indonesian archipelago as well as beyond.

Performance and Bodies

Both Islamic studies and the history discipline are driven by written textual sources, prioritizing the written record and the physical archive over other sites of knowledge production and collection. Vladimir Braginsky, a scholar of comparative Southeast Asian literatures, writes that “Malay culture during its heyday saw the Universe as a book, a work of literature,”⁴³ a sentiment that is shared with much of the Islamic world as its cultural foundation and that is reflected in scholarship on Islam. In placing equal consideration on performance traditions, often transmitted orally/aurally, this dissertation draws attention to the preservation and adaptation of culture and aesthetics through performance.⁴⁴ It is an expansion of sources that facilitates the discussion of conscious selection in the process of identity construction over generations through performance. It argues for consideration of other, so-called ephemeral modes of knowledge transmission, not to replace but rather to augment the textual.

Scholars of dance and music in the 1960s understood “culture” as synonymous with “high art,” a reflection of the European ideological paradigm of classical/folk.⁴⁵ Such emphasis prioritized documentation of dance and choreography through the lens of Western music/dance theory, with minimal consideration of the individual dancing body. In response to the overwhelming Eurocentricity of this position, scholars have since refocused on the “techniques of

⁴³ V. I. Braginsky, *The System of Classical Malay Literature*, Working Papers (Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde (Netherlands)) ; 11 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1993), 1.

⁴⁴ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴⁵ For a discussion of this trend, see Theresa Buckland, *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities* (Madison, WI, USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Holt, *Art in Indonesia*; and Sumarsam, *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

the body” as shared cultural knowledge.⁴⁶ Since the 1970s, dance scholars have meticulously emphasized the body, culture, and embodiment, inspiring Allegra Fuller Snyder’s understanding of dance as a “way of knowing.”⁴⁷ In the mid-1980s, Cynthia Novack Bull centralized the body even further in considering movement as culture, and more recently Tomie Hahn argues that the body is situated by sensorial orientations that inscribe culture, a process she traces through dance transmission.⁴⁸

The shift in dance scholarship towards embodiment and embodied culture suggests that dance is a valuable site to understand how people make sense of their lives, communities, and the past. Such a function rejects understandings of dance traditions as static.⁴⁹ Instead, as Susan Leigh Foster argues, dancers are always in the process of reinterpretation, juggling the preservation of knowledge passed down over generations with the necessary adaptations to different bodies and social demands.⁵⁰ But, as Theresa Buckland aptly warns, it is essential to consult “other source materials [...] in elucidating this archaeology of the body.”⁵¹ In reading the body as text, I aspire to consider performance as one possible way in which Malay histories and identities are made through bodily practices in Sumatra, contributing less-commonly studied traditions as new sources to complement existing textual archives.

⁴⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*, Unnatural Acts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Marcel Mauss, “Les Techniques Du Corps,” *Journal de Psychologie* 32, no. 3–4 (1934).

⁴⁷ Allegra Fuller Snyder, “The Dance Symbol,” in *CORD Research Annual VI. New Dimensions in Dance Research: Anthropology and Dance—The American Indian*, ed. Tamara Comstock (New York: CORD, 1974), 213–24.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Novack Bull, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 12.

⁵⁰ Foster, *Choreographing History*, 4.

⁵¹ Buckland, *Dancing from Past to Present*, 13.

Using my own body as intertext, as Ann Cooper Albright encourages, I strive to consider the archive as a space that performs in concert with arts practitioners today.⁵² This approach gives priority to performance as a site of knowledge production and transference, one that is in continual dialogue with written bodies of the past and moving bodies of the present. I am encouraged to engage with performance as a means of remapping “borders” that define appropriate disciplinary archives. Taking inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa’s influential framework of *Borderlands/La Frontera* to rechart boundaries as psychic, social, and cultural constructions rather than clear lines, I propose a move away from the perceived authority and boundedness of writing.⁵³ Diana Taylor powerfully writes that the rift here is not between the written and spoken word – the two readily coexist. What needs unsettling is the tension between what she calls “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”⁵⁴ Both archive and repertoire are mediated and involve human subjectivity – meaning they are subject to selection, transmission, re-presentation, etc. If this dissertation may be reduced to any one thing, I hope it serves as an appeal to meaningfully consider art and performance for their potential to unsettle narratives of history as singular “truth.” The fluidity of arts practice – both of individual moving bodies and of the material embedded within tradition – provides an antidote of sorts to the tendency

⁵² Ann Cooper Albright, “Tracing the Past: Writing History through the Body,” in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter and Janet O’Shea, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 1998), 101–10; See also: Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007); See also: Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, 19.

to view historical and religious discourses from within a static frame. Just as performance is in constant motion, so too are our understandings of who we are and our collective pasts.⁵⁵

Methodology

Performance scholar Richard Schechner writes that *studying* performance requires *doing* performance.⁵⁶ In conducting my research for this dissertation, I took Schechner's position to heart and engaged with interdisciplinary methods from the fields of history, ethnomusicology, and dance studies to both *study* and *do* in the field. In the chapters that follow, the influence of this approach is felt in the range of sources engaged and in the written style(s) used to bring different materials together.

Research for this project took a variety of forms: 1) seeking out collections of written material in built archives in London and Jakarta,⁵⁷ spending time to sit with them and take notes on them; 2) investing in music and dance private lessons at Institut Seni Indonesia-Padangpanjang, a branch of Indonesia's national arts institute in West Sumatra, and establishing relationships of trust with my teachers and their students; 3) attending performances related to *tari Melayu*, *salawat dulang*, and *randai* (the traditions I studied formally), recording mini-interviews with audience members and performers, and annotating performance observation; and 4) identifying prominent performing artists and elders in West Sumatra and Riau, establishing relationships of trust with them leading to oral history interviews, and transcribing and translating my interviews. While

⁵⁵ In her essay, Farish Noor argues for the embrace of art and performance in expanding the ways we may locate, identify, and define Southeast Asian pasts and presents. See: Farish A. Noor, "The Wheres and Whys of Southeast Asia: Art and Performance in the Locating of Southeast Asia Today," in *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, Politics and the Contemporary* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 275–85.

⁵⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London; New York: Routledge Classics, 2003).

⁵⁷ I also frequented the provincial libraries and archives of West Sumatra and Riau provinces, though materials from these visits will be better suited for future iterations of this project.

several of my interviews were single opportunities to meet and hear from others, I aimed for multiple sessions with as many as possible. My private lessons, in this way, became regular spaces for asking questions and hearing different explanations for movements, meanings, and histories.

Specifically, in the archives in London and Jakarta, I reviewed collections of private papers of British colonial government officials, travelers, and botanists in Sumatra, travel diaries, missionary reports, prints, photographs, policies/documentation of public festivals from the mid- to late-twentieth century, and Islamic cultural newspaper outlets (prioritizing *Gema Islam*, but others like *Siasat* and *Konfrontasi* informed my search). My archival process involved searching for references to dance, performance, entertainment, and religion from and about Sumatra that address how Islam has been represented – and by whom – in the written record. My search for historical performers led me to unexpected places, such as field notes written by British botanists who, along their journey to collect samples of unique flora, were at times entertained with music and dance in a sultan’s palace. Most of this archival work took place in London between December 2018 and March 2019, as well as in Jakarta in parts of July and August 2019.

In Sumatra, I became a member of the campus community at the only national arts institute campus on the island, Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI)-Padangpanjang in West Sumatra province (formerly STSI and, before that, ASKI and KOKAR).⁵⁸ ISI-Padangpanjang offers undergraduate degrees in Performing Arts (under which includes opportunities to pursue Departments of

⁵⁸ Originally formed as a local school for Minangkabau traditional arts under the title KOKAR, the campus at Padangpanjang was established under federal decree as ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia) Padangpanjang in 1965 with two departments, Karawitan (Traditional Music) and Tari (Dance). In 1999, the campus was renamed STSI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia) Padangpanjang, at which point it began to add new departments including Theater, Music, Fine Arts, etc. and eventually a Postgraduate program. In 2010, the campus was renamed as ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia, or Indonesia Institute of Arts) Padangpanjang. As part of the national arts academy system, ISI Padangpanjang joins several other campuses across Indonesia: Yogyakarta (Java), Surakarta (Java), and Denpasar (Bali). There are also ISBI (Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia, or Indonesia Institute of Cultural Arts) campuses in Bandung (Java) and most recently in Aceh and Tanah Papua (the latter two established in 2014 in Aceh and West Papua provinces). Each institution has their own history of integration into the national arts academies.

Traditional Music, Music, Dance, Theater, and Cultural Anthropology) and Fine Arts & Design (added more recently to include Photography, Television & Film, among others). There, I spent extended periods of time engaging in the daily activities of Minang and Malay arts practitioners, learned to dance, drum, and sing with them, and conducted semi-structured interviews and oral history interviews as I earned trust within the campus community. I enrolled in private lessons with several instructors in Karawitan (Traditional Music) and Tari (Dance), and observed (and occasionally was invited to join) numerous group classes in both departments.⁵⁹ I supplemented my ethnographic work with regular trips to the capitals of West Sumatra and Riau provinces to study material in the local archives, take dance/music classes and conduct interviews with practitioners outside the ISI community, and attend public festivals such as an international *pencak silek* (Minang; B.I.: *pencak silat*) festival in Maninjau and a Malay Islamic arts festival in Pekanbaru. My work in Indonesia took place between March 2019 and January 2020, and, except for my archival sojourn in Jakarta, most of that time was in Sumatra.

These methods (archival, oral history, participant observation, and active participation) supported my intention to meet as many people as possible to learn from them and witness how knowledge that has passed down to them then flows to their students. The physicality of each activity was extremely important to me. My body felt the labor of doing this work, and this impact on my body transfers into my intellectual comprehension and ability to share these stories. This took place in both the archival and the ethnographic fieldwork. Sitting in hard chairs in cold, air-conditioned archive buildings, my neck and back would cramp just as much as my emotions would

⁵⁹ Karawitan refers to traditional music, and in Padangpanjang this department includes any traditional arts form that is not explicitly dance. *Randai*, for example, is included in Karawitan as a form of traditional theater instead of being included in the Theater department. Students interested in modern music or musical composition enroll with the Music Department. Tari (Dance), on the other hand, supports the learning of both traditional and more contemporary dance styles.

when reading racist depictions of former colonial subjects or the violent language dehumanizing perceived communists in 1950s and 1960s newspapers. When not in libraries or archives, I was frequently sore after hours of physical practice – from *pencak silat* martial arts training in London (where I trained with Silat Buka Lingkaran to get myself in shape for my upcoming travels to Indonesia), or from *randai* practice with Pak Arif to learn traditional Minang theater that employs *silat*, vocals, storytelling, and *galembong* rhythmic patterns.⁶⁰ My lessons in *tari Melayu* with Bu Adriana and *salawat dulang* with Pak Firdaus required smaller, more controlled movements that took particular focus and patience. When invited to performances, particularly *salawat dulang*, I frequently arrived with the musicians and was permitted access to both the areas for performers (not quite “backstage”) and the audience space. These performances lasted through the night, always beginning after the last evening prayer (*Isha*) and ending by the first morning prayer (*Fajr*).

Writing of the physicality of research, I must also situate my own body in doing this research. I come to this project as an outsider to Malay culture and to Islam. I am a mixed-race third culture kid of the late 1980s, who carries the privilege of American citizenship and capital. Raised by parents who rejected most aspects of organized religion, they introduced me to Hindu-Buddhist spirituality through dance, yoga, and talks at Berkeley’s ashrams. I like to believe that this upbringing instilled flexibility from an early age to find somewhere in-between to exist and hold space for myself and my story. I therefore come to my research in many ways far removed

⁶⁰ I do not focus on *randai* in this dissertation, but *randai* deeply informed my understanding of Minang language and culture. *Randai* is a form of traditional folk theater that incorporates Minang legends (*kaba*) that are sung in *dendang* verse while performers form a circle and move through dance and *silat* synchronized routines. Their movements are accentuated by the sound of their *galembong* pants, loose pants with fabric connecting the two legs that is struck like a drum to different rhythmic patterns throughout the performance. *Galembong* percussive sections are lively and demonstrate the level of practice required to properly synchronize across a large group. Kirstin Pauka at University of Hawaii at Manoa has written extensively about *randai* from her fieldwork in Padangpanjang, where she worked with my teacher Pak Arif, Zulkifli, among others. See: Kirstin Pauka, *Theater and Martial Arts in West Sumatra: Randai and Silek of the Minangkabau*, 1st ed., Monographs in International Studies (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998); Zulkifli and Erlinda, “Changes in Cultural Ethics in Randai in Minangkabau,” *Arts and Design Studies* 76 (2019): 62–71.

from the cultures I study, but with an open receptivity to approach Islam and Malay tradition with deep respect and willingness to learn. My identity, background, and past experiences, which all shape how I see the world, filter how I understand this research. I strive to do justice to my teachers and to the materials I engage with by sharing their stories as my body understands them; any mistake in this retelling is my own.

My methodological approach reflects how I understand the discipline of history to be capable of including movement and fluidity. I am invested, personally and professionally, in making space for intangible art forms to be seen as productive sites of memory and knowledge production, sites that I believe are just as valuable to the discipline as are physical, written materials. I follow Malaysian historian Farish Noor's call for history to be "supplemented, aided and accompanied by other approaches and techniques that are to be found beyond the confines of the ivory tower."⁶¹ The power of performance is one way to address this. Below, I discuss a few of the inspirations for this project and the form that it now takes.

Intellectual and Methodological Inspirations

The work of ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi, discussed above, was among the first materials I engaged with that combined studies of dance with historical context. Her discussion of *Tari Gending Sriwijaya*, considered a popular representation of South Sumatran culture and which is frequently performed at regional festivals or state ceremonies, inspired my earlier work for my master's study on Sriwijaya and its powerful contributions to Indonesian national identity

⁶¹ Noor, "The Wheres and Whys of Southeast Asia: Art and Performance in the Locating of Southeast Asia Today," 280.

construction.⁶² This work contributed to my decision to continue seeking music and dance as active sites where historical memory was negotiated. Similarly, the work of historian Laurie Sears supported the development of an approach to performing arts and oral history, helping me to cross the bridge from tangible to intangible in early conceptualizations of this dissertation project. This work is particularly useful to think about historical knowledge transmission, the false assumptions regarding a relationship between text and performance, between literacy and orality, and the potential of performing arts traditions to serve as vehicles that facilitate the passing down of knowledge and that embed new information as a strategy for survival and/or social critique.⁶³

What may perhaps be most immediately apparent in reading this dissertation is my application of different writing styles. The decisions I made to write the way I do are my attempt to address the interdisciplinarity of this topic, and the necessary inclusion of myself as researcher – whose “bodynotes” and biases shape the way that I understand these stories.⁶⁴ Priya Srinivasan, who engages dance history, ethnography, labor history, and constructions of race, citizenship, and gender in the context of South Asian dancers in the United States, experiments with self-reflexive writing that threads together her archival research, historical analysis, and use of the “bodily archive.”⁶⁵ Her focus on labor is particularly powerful, as is the significance of markers like sweat

⁶² See: Margaret J. Kartomi, “The Paradoxical and Nostalgic History of « Gending Sriwijaya » in South Sumatra,” *Archipel* 45, no. 1 (1993): 37–50; Timothy Daniels, “Imagining Selves and Inventing Festival Sriwijaya,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (1999): 38–53.

⁶³ See: Sears, *Shadows of Empire*; Joyce B. Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears, eds., *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia ; No. 35 (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1991).

⁶⁴ “Bodynotes” is the term Jonathan Skinner uses to describe an individual’s stored muscle memory of learned movements. See: Jonathan Skinner, “Leading Questions and Body Memories: A Case of Phenomenology and Physical Ethnography in the Dance Interview,” in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, ed. Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 111–28.

⁶⁵ She defines the “bodily archive” as an archive which leaves its traces in “live bodily interactions,” a history captured through muscle memory instead of through documents alone. See: Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 17.

stains and calluses that expose the illusion of effortless performance. She also advocates for a new methodology of the “unruly spectator” as a performer-researcher who offers a nonpassive feminist perspective based on her own involvement in the community she studies, an approach that comes especially to life in her interactive multimedia dance performance based on her book.⁶⁶

The work of two others shaped my understanding of writing about performance. Kirin Narayan’s work on ethnographic writing and ethnographically informed prose served as a reliable reminder of why writing choices matter. In particular, she provides a guide for developing a range of voices within the writing experience, changing depending on how my relationship to the material changed and the desired affect for my readers.⁶⁷ In her earlier influential essay “How Native is the Native Anthropologist,” Narayan argues for the “enactment of hybridity” in writing.⁶⁸ Authors are all inherently bi- (or multi-) cultural, representing the world of scholarship and the world of everyday life at once. We carry both our personal and our ethnographic/researcher selves, all at once. Such an approach centers the humanity of our subjects and topics. It is people – not abstracted theory – that fill our writing. To write with an acknowledgment of one’s own cultural navigations is part of the project of seeking equity and reciprocity in academic scholarship. Lastly, Julietta Singh’s exploration in *No Archive Will Restore You* puts to words that which I struggled to do myself. Among many other things, Singh writes of the deeply ingrained desire in academia to locate the “right” archive and the sense of false salvation that such an archive provides. She writes of the body archive – the assembly of history’s traces deposited in one’s body – and the effort to dig through the archive of one’s own body and the anxieties that this unfolds. Reading Singh, for

⁶⁶ I was fortunate to witness her perform her research in April 2018 at the University of Washington’s Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Theatre.

⁶⁷ Kirin Narayan, *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁶⁸ Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 681.

me, is a personal exercise in brave writing, a challenge to explore writing styles that expose the writer more than traditional academic prose may encourage.

These inspirations altogether inform how I approach my research and how I employ writing in this dissertation. In each chapter, I alternate between what could be called my “personal” and my “public” voice, wherein the former employs self-reflexivity to situate myself within the material as medium through which my interpretation necessarily flows, and the latter engages description, discussion, and analysis from a place of relative distance. I refrain from calling this public voice an “historical” voice to avoid the conflation of history as singular truth. The intention behind my shifting voice in writing is not to associate one with analytical clarity more than the other. Rather, I wish to show how writing about research materials may be supported by writing also about my engagement with those materials. My hope is that this demonstrates how I developed the ideas and arguments that form this dissertation. It is also my answer to the difficulty of writing about performance – in shifting voice and perspective, I hope to invite movement into the minds of the reader and show as best I can the dynamic conditions in which these stories live and thrive.

Chapter Organization

This dissertation is concerned with questions of Islamic representation through Malay *dakwah* arts traditions. On the one hand, it addresses how Malay Muslim identity has been formulated by different actors; on the other, it approaches the issue of legitimacy – of art, and of arts within Islamic practice. To begin, Chapter One discusses the emergence of racialized Malayness in colonial discourse that set a persistent image against which Malay peoples and their cultural traditions were assessed, as seen through the words of British travelers and botanists who wrote about their time visiting Sumatra. This chapter questions the depiction of Malay peoples

through rigid and racist stereotypes that ignored or erased the depth of local tradition and the importance of Islam amongst Malay communities while simultaneously exotifying the land and its resources. Negative representations of peoples and cultures – that of being unfriendly, uncivilized, unmusical, and not very Muslim (or at least not Muslim enough to grant concern) – stand in stark contrast with the elaborate praise afforded to Sumatra’s landscapes and botanical diversity. This dichotomy exposes one way in which Malay peoples were dehumanized and how nonhuman subjects were afforded more care than human counterparts in colonial regimes.

Chapter Two explores the position of Indonesia’s first Islamic cultural organization to emerge in the 1950s, *Himpunan Seni Budajawan Islam*, the large conference (*musjawarah*) it held in December 1961, and its newspaper outlet, *Gema Islam*. This event is significant for further study because of the *fatwa* it issued describing the position of Islamic arts within Indonesia’s society, specifically what is permitted and what is not. It also is a valuable event that highlights the significant role that Hamka, an influential writer and Islamic scholar, played in shaping acceptable Islamic arts practice. This chapter serves to situate the sociocultural and political landscape of the 1960s in Indonesia as the anxieties over communist and anticommunist forces heightened to the tremendous violence unleashed upon the Left in 1965-66, a period of mass murder that left a lasting impression upon all aspects of Indonesian society, including the arts.⁶⁹ As Suharto took up leadership of the nation, he promoted a nationwide sanitation of the arts to conform with new national ideals and national historical memory. Muslim artists conformed or otherwise adapted to

⁶⁹ The violence that brought in Suharto's New Order is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. See: Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (Princeton: University Press, 2018); John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, eds., *Tahun Yang Tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65: Esai-esai Sejarah Lisan*, Cet. 1. (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat ELSAM bekerja sama dengan Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan dan Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia, 2004).

these new conditions, now freed of their supposed enemy of the Left. Because the national arts institutes were formalized under Suharto, many leading Islamic performing artists in Sumatra that trained at these institutes have been influenced by this new understanding of national culture and identity. This chapter also dedicates space to understanding the nuances behind “Islamic art” – what constitutes Islamic art, for whom, and what *dakwah* has to do with it.

Chapter Three is the first extended exploration of the personal voice discussed above. It includes a history, as told by elders and practitioners, of *salawat dulang*. A Minang oral tradition from West Sumatra, *salawat dulang* is explicitly a *dakwah* arts tradition that employs the voice and the beating of a metal plate like a frame drum. Sharing stories of the Prophet and exploring verses from the Qur’an, *salawat dulang* is an introspective tradition with roots in the Sufi *Syattariyah* brotherhood. This chapter explores the deep significance of *tasawwuf*, or Sufi mystical learning, in this traditional form of *dakwah* in contemporary West Sumatra, an art form that has been less commonly included in academic studies of the Malay Islamic arts. It also provides an overview of the five core sections that comprise *salawat dulang* performance and engages with the dual components of deep religiosity and built-in innovation that have secured *salawat dulang*’s survival over significant social and cultural change.

Chapter Four explores the history and artists of *zapin*, a vibrant social dance and musical style popularized by Arab traders in the marketplaces of Sumatra centuries ago and that exists in varying forms across the Indian Ocean world today. As an embodied arts practice, *zapin* reflects highly local understandings of Islam and the different ways that performers seek to inform and represent their Islamic identities in a globalizing world. This chapter also engages with critical gender studies in considering the inclusion of female dancers into formerly male-dominated spaces and the choices that they make to affirm female Muslim identity. Between *zapin* and *salawat*

dulang, the final two chapters of this dissertation provide a focused look at the two primary pathways along which Islam traveled across Sumatra through the arts – Sufi mystical knowledge passed down from teacher to student and Arab travelers communing and sharing with locals.

Collectively, these chapters seek to represent the different ways that performance comes to life in imagining the construction of Malay and Islamic histories and identities in Sumatra. The mischaracterizations of Malayness discussed in Chapter One influenced the manner in which self-organizing modernist Muslim activists in the early years of Indonesia's nationhood promoted their Muslim-ness, advocating for Islamic arts that are deeply connected to *dakwah* and thus permissible as expressions of God's beauty. These perspectives set the tone for the formation of Indonesia's national arts colleges under the New Order, which most of the artists centered in Chapters Three and Four visited or attended in some way. These chapters come together in presenting an argument for how performing artists continue to make space for themselves and their identities as Malay and as Muslim. This dissertation seeks to expand global understandings of Islam by prioritizing underrepresented voices of dance and oral tradition practitioners, situating performance as a meaningful site to interrogate constructions of history and identity in Malay Sumatra.

CHAPTER ONE

MIS/REPRESENTING MALAYNESS: IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY AS FORMED THROUGH BRITISH COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS WITH SUMATRAN PEOPLES AND LANDSCAPES

I. INTRODUCTION

“She was very beautiful, and her eyes made magic,” Private P. Sommerton Richards wrote, reminiscing about his chance encounter with the famed dancer Mata Hari along the quay in Boulogne.⁷⁰ Making her debut in the salons of Europe in 1905 under the adopted name Mata Hari (“Eye of the Day”), Dutchwoman Margaretha Geertruida Zelle MacLeod is most often remembered as a courtesan and femme fatale accused of espionage during World War I. Executed in 1917 by firing squad in France, there is significant doubt over the credibility of this accusation, and many believe she was used as a scapegoat to cover up France’s military losses and to admonish her character as amoral given her position as a financially independent divorcée with international connections due to her performance persona.⁷¹

Mata Hari’s image as an exotic dancer/double agent has inspired numerous representations in popular culture. But it is the manipulation of ethnicity – her “metaphorical minstrelsy,” to use Susan Manning’s term referring to the way that white dancers created representations of dance traditions belonging to non-white peoples – that is of greatest interest in this project.⁷² At various times, Mata Hari was described as a priestess of Isis, a woman of Javanese descent, a high-caste

⁷⁰ P. Sommerton Richards, “When I ‘Held up’ the Spy, Mata-Hari. Sentry’s Midnight Encounter with Beautiful Dancer,” *Dundee People’s Journal*, October 20, 1917.

⁷¹ Matthew Isaac Cohen writes that Mata Hari’s accusers at the end of her life essentialized her ambiguous ethnic identity, depicting her as “an Asiatic type” who weaponized her femininity to obtain classified information. Matthew Isaac Cohen, “Mata Hari,” in *Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 23–35.

⁷² Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance : Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Indian princess, and a high priestess with the skill to charm snakes.⁷³ One admirer wrote in 1905 that:

Mata Hari has now put it upon record that she is a Javanese, and is translating the recondite rites of Buddha (which do not vary very much from those of Isis, but who minds that?) into the poesy of beauty and of form on the Olympian stage.⁷⁴

Other accounts of her suggest her adoption of various Asian guises while living in the Dutch and British colonies:

Feeling keenly interested in the Hindoo dances she was enabled, thanks to her knowledge of Malay and Hindustani, to make a careful study of them, little thinking that a few years later this study would stand her in good stead.⁷⁵

Someone, who recognized her ability as a dancer, induced her to dress up in Malayan costume and perform at a house party.⁷⁶

Mata Hari, “with her snakes and sinuous dances,”⁷⁷ joins the ranks of other elite white female dancers in the early 20th century who employed cultural appropriation and misidentification to launch independent performance careers. Amid the historical social movements of the time seeking suffrage and citizenship for white women, dancers like Mata Hari, Maud Allan, and Ruth St. Denis (the latter two being pioneers of modern dance) made space for themselves to gain cultural capital and economic independence. Their success, however, was possible only at the expense of women of color whose images were routinely sexualized while they themselves were invisible in the same performance spaces. As performance scholar Priya Srinivasan asks, “If white dancers could be more exotic in brownface, what was the need for nautch dancers?”⁷⁸ This

⁷³ “Gossip from the Gay City - A Plea for Thoroughness - Sardou’s Opera Bouffe,” *The Referee*, August 27, 1905; “Mata-Hari (Lady MacLeod),” *The Era*, September 23, 1905; “Dancing Girl Spy. ‘Mata Hari’ Loses Appeal in France. Death Sentence. Fate of a Fascinating Woman.,” *The Liverpool Echo*, September 28, 1917.

⁷⁴ “Gossip from the Gay City - A Plea for Thoroughness - Sardou’s Opera Bouffe.”

⁷⁵ “Mata-Hari (Lady MacLeod).”

⁷⁶ “Mata Hari: An Impression of the Famous Woman Spy by One Who Knew Her--Her Life in Amsterdam during the War,” *The Sphere*, February 9, 1935.

⁷⁷ “Dancing Girl Spy. ‘Mata Hari’ Loses Appeal in France. Death Sentence. Fate of a Fascinating Woman.”

⁷⁸ Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 58. The word “nautch” is derived from the Sanskrit word for “dance” or “dancing.” While “nautch” alone

phenomenon in the development of modern dance in Europe and America, the transplantation of “Eastern” performance practices onto white elite female bodies, enabled dancers like Mata Hari to perform a confusing mixture of exoticized identities – Indian, Javanese, Malay, Hindu, Buddhist, Egyptian, princess/priestess. Her orientalism is a performance of white cultural privilege that renders white female bodies unmarked to speak universally, whereas those Othered bodies remain marked as different and undesirable.

The implications of racial and cultural misidentifications such as these extend beyond the lives of individual celebrated artists. Performances of Otherness and their eager reception by European audiences contributed to broader trends in cultural history to conflate terms like “Malay” with anything and everything “Oriental.” To this end, we see accounts in English language newspapers describing young Asian dancers as “genuine Eastern dancers [...] draped in long, flowing silk scarves and Oriental muslins, [...] a whirl of dusky figures, pirouetting and bounding, [dancing] that weird and beautiful Malay dance called the Bayadene dance.”⁷⁹ The *bayadere*, or *bayadene*, was a term broadly used across Europe and America to describe female dancers from Asia, dressed in a manner imagined and popularized by performers like Mata Hari: draping jewelry and loose, flowing clothing that sensuously exposed skin.⁸⁰ Laying the grounds for the discourse within which *nautch* temple dancers took place, the figure of the *bayadere* was used to evoke female performers from regions far away, collapsing geographically diverse regions across the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia into a single image.

might intend *adivasi* and *devadasi* spiritual dance, the term (“nautch dancers” or “nautch girls” specifically) reflects the culture of young female court dancers popularized during the East India Company era in South Asia, where female dancers performed for the attention of a male audience. “Nautch” performers were necessarily sexualized, and by the early 20th century “nautch” had become synonymous with prostitution and decadence.

⁷⁹ “Tragedy of the Bayadene Dancers.,” *Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday*, September 15, 1923.

⁸⁰ The ballet, *La Bayadère*, was first performed in 1877 by the Russian Imperial Ballet with numerous revivals and adaptations since then. The image of the *bayadere* also influenced Western composers like Johann Strauss, among others.

The use of the term “Malay” to describe exoticized activities like the *bayadere* dance is informed by the colonial-era discourse that surrounds Malayness as a monolithic, yet geographically ambiguous, group. Such broad usage of the term, while confusing, contributed to colonial representations of Malay peoples and traditions that minimize or otherwise obscure any association with Islam or with skilled art forms. Academic language situating Southeast Asia within “Greater India” further masked the region’s Islamic histories.⁸¹ Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, while controversial, observes the tendency to contrast Islam with the image of a “peaceful” Hindu/Buddhist India as an essential strategy of European (and American) colonial domination, delegitimizing the long history of Islam and the diversity of Islamic cultures across the Muslim world.⁸² In the case of the Southeast Asian archipelago, mis/representations of Malayness via the Malay *bayadere* and figures like Mata Hari contributed to the dismissal of Islam’s early existence in the region, overlooking the important relationship between Islamic and Malay identities and confining Malay arts practices to that of a sexualized Other.

As subsequent chapters will show, Malay Muslim identity is deeply significant in the production of Malay arts and the livelihood of Malay artists in a place like Sumatra. This chapter sets the groundwork by exploring how the term “Malay” has been employed in one European archive – one containing the impressions of (mostly) British naturalists – to represent a people and a set of traditions. In orienting ourselves towards encounters with Sumatra in European sources, we may better understand the historical context that entangles the Malay arts with the colonial production of knowledge, and we may appreciate more fully the extent to which Malay arts practitioners resist such flattening narratives and strive to make space for themselves and their

⁸¹ Coedès, *Histoire Ancienne Des États Hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient*; Chong-Guan, *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India: An Anthology of Articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society*.

⁸² Said, *Orientalism*.

craft in cultural memory. By obscuring the meaning of Malayness as a cultural identity, colonial mis/representations of Sumatran Malay landscapes and peoples produced a set of images against which Malay Muslim artists have juxtaposed their own self-representations in more recent decades. This response is discussed in subsequent chapters, which delve into the agendas of Indonesian Islamic arts organizations and Malay Muslim arts practices since the 1960s. In anticipation of this focus on the arts, this chapter discusses how the term “Malay” appears in colonial representations of Southeast Asia and the impact of imperialism on generalizing race, mischaracterizing ethnicity, and obscuring local Islam.

II. THE MATERIALS

The Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG), Kew in London may strike some as a peculiar destination for archival study of historical Malay representation, yet in early 2019 I found myself returning day after day to the Library & Archives Reading Room to learn about Sumatran plants and their meticulous British collectors. The damp chill of winter in the UK, the kind that makes one’s joints stiffen with one glance out the window, made my daily commute to Kew a bit disorienting. Walking from the London Overground train station towards the Herbarium building at the northeastern corner of the gardens – with hands stuffed into my coat pockets and nose buried in my shawl – I could feel the humid warmth of lush flora peeking over Elizabeth Gate. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kew Gardens supports over 50,000 living plants from across the world, from arctic to tropical climates. Among these unique specimens is titan arum, or “corpse flower,” whose flowering structure (technically known as an “unbranched inflorescence”) is the largest the world has ever seen – and infamously stinky to attract its carnivorous pollinators. Native to Sumatra, titan arum bloomed for the first time outside of its indigenous habitat in 1889 at Kew.

Its second blooming at Kew, which drew crowds large enough to call in the police, took place in 1926. Knowing that so many tropical plants thrived in Kew's greenhouses softened my body and loosened my joints just a little against London's cold.

Located nine miles west of central London, Kew Gardens hugs the southern boundary of the Thames and dates to the 18th century. Today, Kew serves as a world-renowned scientific and research institution for the study and conservation of plants and fungi. The RBG Kew Archives hosts material on the history of discovery, study, transfer, and use of plants and fungi from across the world. Among these materials are correspondence papers, maps, plans, notebooks, records of plants received and sent, and photographs from the personal collections of botanists, gardeners, and explorers. Charles Darwin's letters written aboard *HMS Beagle* are some of the more famous items held in the Archives collection.

I was attracted to the Kew Archives for a few reasons. The island of Sumatra is home to an incredible diversity of plants and animals, many of which are critically endangered today.⁸³ A significant arm of British colonial administration included the scientific documentation and collection of these unique species, knowledge that was then published in English language books and journals to advance scientific inquiry of the natural world. While colonial scholars trained broadly in the languages and cultures of the colonies before ever leaving Europe (made possible by the formation of large training institutions like the School of Oriental and African Studies), explorers and botanists were already on the ground in Sumatra, writing down their observations and collecting their samples. The transplantation of the titan arum "corpse flower" in the 1800s was just one among hundreds of plants that British naturalists took from Sumatra to "safely" archive back in their home country. Quotidian as well as luxury plant products – indigenous or

⁸³ The Sumatran tiger, Sumatran rhinoceros, and Asian tapir are all endangered species.

transplanted for plantation production – abounded in Sumatra; descriptions of jaggery, areca nut, pepper, nutmeg, clove, camphor, jute, coffee, and other spices like ginger, cardamom, curcumin, and coriander fill the pages of diaries written by men traveling through Sumatra to document its biodiversity and collect specimens under the auspices of preservation.⁸⁴ The resulting botanical archive that Kew represents is similar to other efforts to document, collect, display, and/or store information about Others – whether those Others are human, animal, or botanical.

The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew provides a lens to study British empire and the imperial production of knowledge through plant sciences. As Richard Drayton powerfully argues in *Nature's Government*, botany was a significant channel for propagating notions of “improvement” that spun through imperial rhetoric, and the botanical garden (in the colonies and in the metropole such as at Kew) was a place for enacting missionary civilization.⁸⁵ The production of knowledge about plants and their maximized potential therefore traces the history of British imperialism. This chapter engages with such material to discuss the ways in which fauna and flora were employed in colonial rhetoric to produce lasting impressions about people. While this chapter focuses primarily on this specific archive of English botanical materials, these descriptions and beliefs were not the first of their kind. They relied upon interactions with other Europeans, namely the Dutch, who visited and wrote about Sumatra centuries before the British. The *Repetitorium Op de Koloniale Litteratuur* alone contains over 4,000 entries written between 1595 and 1865, almost 100 of which address Sumatra.⁸⁶ In the descriptions that follow, effusive praise of landscapes

⁸⁴ Friedrich Anton Wilhelm Miquel, “Geography and Vegetation of Sumatra (Bentham’s Translation of the Introduction to Flora van Nederlandsch Indie),” trans. George Bentham, 1860, 55–59, John Howard Papers, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

⁸⁵ Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸⁶ J.C. Hookyaas, ed., *Repetitorium Op de Koloniale Litteratuur: Of Systematische Inhoudsopgaaf van Hetgen Voorkomt over de Koloniën (Beoosten de Kaap)*, in *Mengelwerken En Tijdschriften, van 1595 Tot 1865 Uitgegeven, in Nederland En Zijne Overzeesche Bezittingen*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen & Zoon, 1877);

stands in obvious contrast with denigrating criticism of local populations. The words of British travelers and naturalists kept alive an exaggerated and damaging image of Malays against the backdrop of pristine natural beauty, encouraging the paternalistic imperative to explore and preserve faraway lands due to inadequate local stewardship.⁸⁷ The production of such stereotypes matters because this image of Malay peoples would last generations – an image that some Malay artists continually work to reverse using their cultural arts traditions. In the sections below, we will follow a handful of voyagers, botanists, and colonial administrators who traversed the Malay archipelago between the late 18th century through the early 20th century and who left behind words that reflect British cultural assumptions about Malayness in the colonial period. Their accounts of the region, the people they encountered, and the activities they witnessed showcase how Malayness appears in one British archive, an archive whose legacy contributed to a colonial script that valued Sumatra's fauna and flora above local Malay lives and that informed colonial projects of racialization and control.

III. DUE EAST: NAUTICAL ENCOUNTERS WITH SUMATRA

One early morning in late February 1773, the officers of HMS *Lion* and HMS *Hindustan* caught sight of Java Head (*Tanjung Layar*, as it is called in Indonesian), the western-most prominence off the island of Java, as their ships rounded into the Sunda Strait after months of long-distance ocean travel. On board was the British Ambassador George Macartney and his secretary

See also: S. de Graff and D.G. Stibbe, eds., *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsche-Indie* ('s-Gravenhage; Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff; N.V. v/h. E.J. Brill, 1918). I am indebted to Dr. Wolfgang Linser for meeting with me to discuss these Dutch materials as I revised this chapter and for assisting me with difficult translations of select passages.

⁸⁷ In his popular 2020 book, Dan Hicks engages the example of the Benin Bronzes to discuss how European art museum leadership justifies their continued possession of stolen artifacts by citing the paternalistic assumption that Britain – or other former seats of empire – are better prepared to preserve the cultural heritage of others. See: Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (Pluto Press, 2020).

Sir George Staunton, key members of the Macartney Embassy, Britain's inaugural envoy from Britain to China. To get there, the embassy voyaged through the islands of the Malay archipelago during the final years of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) before the Company, upon bankruptcy, transitioned into colonial administration of the Dutch East Indies in 1800.⁸⁸ Breaking their journey in Batavia, the embassy was treated to visits from Dutch officials and they met with fellow English officers of the British East India Company (EIC) stationed there as Staunton and his company explored the coastlines and the many small islands between Sumatra and Java. This archipelagic hub served as an important rendezvous site for European and Chinese travelers alike moving to and from mainland China, and Sumatra was already well-established within Arab understandings of Indian Ocean geography.⁸⁹ The visible presence of Chinese junks in the harbor and surrounding waters, vessels "so ill calculated for long voyages" in Staunton's view, suggested China's geographical proximity, and Staunton anticipated a long stay around Batavia to exchange news while the crew recovered from the longest part of the ocean journey, restocked supplies, and prepared for their reception in China.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ In this dissertation, Malay archipelago refers to the island chain that rests between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and that is sandwiched by mainland Southeast Asia and Australia. This region has been attributed numerous names over time, including "Indian archipelago" by British sources, "Insulindia" by Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish sources, and "Indonesian archipelago" in more recent modern history. In the 19th century, "Malay archipelago" was popularized in part through the work of Alfred Russel Wallace who published his origin of species studies in *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869.

⁸⁹ Ahmad ibn Majid's navigational treatise, *Kitab al-Fawa'id fi-usul 'ilm al-bahr wa'l-qawa'id* (often simplified as the *Fawa'id*) was likely written around 1489-1490 CE and includes passages describing the island of Sumatra. The western coast was documented with information about ports and topography relevant for navigation; the eastern coast, by contrast, had minimal description. While Sumatra is included in the *Fawa'id*, the text reveals some confusion about the island, namely the word Sumatra being used both for the entire island and the port of Pasai. This text also includes description of the regions to the west of Cape Comorin as "above the winds" and that east of it as "beneath the wind," phrasing that persists in the Malay language (*di atas angin* and *di bawah angin*). See: Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese, Being a Translation of Kitāb al-Fawā'id Fī Usūl al-Bahr Wa'l-Qawā'id of Ahmad b. Mājid al-Najdī*.

⁹⁰ Sir George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China [...]* (London: W. Bulmer & Co, 1797), 236. The Macartney Embassy stopped at various ports along their way to China, including Rio de Janeiro and the islands of St. Helena, Tristan da Cunha, among others.

Navigating *Tanjung Layar* and North Island before docking in Batavia, Staunton wrote effusive descriptions about the surrounding coastal landscape and the waters in the Strait. Commenting on the brilliance of the fresh breeze, tropical birds, and porpoises, he believed that “the whole [...] scenery, inferior indeed in grandeur to that of the lofty range of mountains round the harbour of Rio de Janeiro, [was] but scarcely to be exceeded in the softness, richness, and gaiety of its appearance.” The two prominent islands of Java and Sumatra both featured low marshlands near the shore before climbing “in a gradual slope towards the interior of the country, admitting in their ascent every variety of situation, and all the different tints of verdure.” Coral of all colors formed the foundations of the small islands situated between Java and Sumatra. Yet the reality of mosquito- and water-borne diseases dampened Staunton’s perspective of place. The “sun’s vertical heat,” “pestilential” air, and poisonous water led to countless cases of malaria and other illness amongst Europeans in the region. Expressing dismay with a “verdant, gay, and fertile” landscape that challenges one’s health in this way, he exclaimed, “what an excellent habitation it would be for immortals!”⁹¹

Staunton and other members of the British embassy found themselves stalled for nearly two months around the Sunda Strait as they waited for the appropriate change of monsoon winds to facilitate their arrival in Canton (Guangzhou). The passengers of the *Lion* and *Hindostan* occupied their time by exploring, documenting, and updating their existing charts with new measurements of Sumatra’s southeastern shore.⁹² During this impromptu stay in and around the Sunda and Bangka Straits, Staunton and others met local seafaring peoples who would frequently surround the *Lion* and *Hindostan* selling fresh fruits, vegetables, and other wares. Staunton

⁹¹ Staunton, 231–32, 229, 249–50.

⁹² Staunton, 280–83.

describes locals approaching the large British ships in boats (bow and stern pointed, and each fitted with a moving rudder to easily steer backwards or forwards) as well as canoes (so narrow that they required outriggers off the side to avoid capsizing). In his written account, Staunton describes these locals as those who “reside chiefly along the coasts of most of the islands in the Chinese seas, and are known by the general name of Malays, having a language and manners common to them all.”⁹³ The time that Staunton and others in his company spent awaiting the changing monsoon winds – a period of about seven weeks in early 1773 – provided an introduction to some of the Malay communities living around and in connection with these archipelagic waters.⁹⁴

In a pedantic style typical of European embassy missions, Staunton wrote extensive anecdotes to generalize Malay character as he believed he understood it. Concluding overall that the Malays in this region “lead an indolent and miserable life,” Staunton described the communities he encountered as being overly cautious of danger, and as such they never ventured out “[tho] otherwise half naked, without being armed.”⁹⁵ The Malay weapon of choice was the *keris*, a dagger, which Staunton claims was also dipped in a poisonous plant-based mixture to further injure an opponent. Even in moments of leisure, such as a mask dance performance in Bantam on Java’s coast, Malay spectators sat armed with *keris*, and the “Europeans seated amongst them were not altogether free from apprehension, lest [the Malays led] a treacherous attack upon them.”⁹⁶ Detailing episodes of supposed unprovoked violence along Sumatra’s southeastern coast,

⁹³ Staunton, 290.

⁹⁴ Staunton and company first caught sight of Java Head on February 25th, 1793. After a few weeks in Batavia, the embassy party lingered around the Sunda and Banka Straits until April 16th, 1793 when the winds finally changed in their favor. Staunton wrote: “Two ships from China arrived, indeed, in the middle of April after a short passage, which implied, that the monsoon continued still unfavourable for going there, at least quickly. [...] Very soon afterwards the winds were so far shifted, as to encourage the Lion to set sail.” Sir George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China [...]* (London: W. Bulmer & Co, 1797).

⁹⁵ Staunton, 290–91.

⁹⁶ Staunton, 300.

Staunton narrates the murder of one of the embassy's craftsmen as the individual went ashore to wash linens, an event that local leaders later blamed on nearby pirates. Writing that "these pirates are Malays also," Staunton declares this explanation as a lie fabricated by the locals to avoid accountability, a claim that projects Malays as unnecessarily violent as well as distrustful.⁹⁷ Commenting on stature, complexion, hair, and bone structure, Staunton readily engages conclusions derived from scientific racism to identify what he called the "violent, [...] ill disposition of the natives," few of whom "had countenances which indicated any control of the mind over the sensual or vulgar passions."⁹⁸

When not hypothesizing the Malay propensity towards violence and deceit, Staunton condescends local intelligence. In an anecdote seemingly intended to prove that local Malays possessed "some degree of considerate civilization," Staunton describes how locals removed a sign put in place by one of the British captains to forage and repurpose the metal nails. Instead of discarding the sign as expected, "the Malay [...] took care, after removing the nails, to replace the board with wooden pegs; and it was found in this condition, inverted indeed, through ignorance of the language written on it."⁹⁹ While Staunton may have included this story in his travelogue for levity, imagining the amusement he may inspire in his readers back home, his representation of locals as occasionally well-meaning illiterates exposes the British imperialist mindset that situates non-whites lower in their hierarchy of race and society. In this example, Staunton uses jest and colonial paternalism to disguise his racism.

While the Macartney Embassy to China was not considered a political success for the British Empire, the account written by George Staunton (which was published in 1797) was

⁹⁷ Staunton, 292–94.

⁹⁸ Staunton, 296, 291.

⁹⁹ Staunton, 292.

applauded for contributing observations of Chinese culture and geography for the first time to a British audience. The text that would reach this new English-speaking audience included his narration of the long journey, complete with his descriptions of Malay peoples like those above. Staunton's beliefs and the decisions he made to elevate the Malay archipelago's natural beauty while denigrating the character of local peoples left a lasting imprint on colonial accounts of the Malay world. Staunton's stylistic choices also indicate an emerging pattern of mischaracterizing Malay peoples exclusively for an English readership situated far away. Such misrepresentations juxtapose in striking contrast Sumatra's natural beauty with a violent and un- or poorly civilized peoples, named uniformly "Malay." Prioritizing fauna and flora over living individuals, such records suggest that the biodiversity in a place like Sumatra can only be appreciated and interpreted by European foreigners ("specialists"). That local peoples do not understand the wealth that surrounds them is a frequently employed trope of European imperialism to justify resource and knowledge extraction, while at the same time such a narrative overlooks local usage of plants and animals as well as any deeper local understanding of the environment. The work of the Dutch-writing German botanist Rumphius in *The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet*, which compiled over 1,200 species of fauna and flora indigenous to Ambon in the late 17th century, was the product of decades of living in Ambon with an Ambonese wife and son who assisted him in his collecting. Their local knowledge, though unaccredited, cannot be overlooked.¹⁰⁰

Records such as those written by George Staunton set the stage for continued characterizations of Malay peoples by foreign specialists, typically writing in service of the British Crown. In 1814 (seventeen years after the publication of Staunton's travelogue), British surgeon Benjamin Heyne published an extensive volume of notes and letters covering his twenty-year

¹⁰⁰ Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, *The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet*, trans. E. M. Beekman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

career with the British East India Company (EIC). While he dedicates most of this work to the years spent observing various regions and industries in British India on the Indian Subcontinent, he includes ten letters about Sumatra from his 1812 journey home from Bengal on the *Harleston* via British Bencoolen (today's Bengkulu in southwestern Sumatra). Written over the course of five weeks when Heyne was in the vicinity of coastal Bencoolen and Rat Island (a small staging post surrounded by rocky coral reefs ten kilometers west of Bencoolen),¹⁰¹ these letters provide extensive commentary about life on the ship as well as the social, political, and economic arrangements in Britain's primary outpost on Sumatra at that time.¹⁰²

Echoing the pattern of George Staunton in the late 18th century, Heyne contrasted his unique geophysical surroundings with his opinions on local peoples:

We hear frequently in India of the gold brought from Sumatra, of Benjamin [benzoin resin], camphire, pepper, all articles of great importance, of which the natural history is almost unknown; and as frequently of its murderous and dastardly inhabitants, who had lately assassinated their Governor, and are in the constant custom of plundering such ships as they can master, or are not on their guard against insidious attacks.¹⁰³

In this passage, Heyne positions Sumatra's fame as bifurcated. The island's desirable luxury items – gold for jewelry and coins, benzoin for vanilla-like perfume and incense, camphor for medicinal analgesic, embalming agent, and antimalarial,¹⁰⁴ and pepper for spice – clash with the island's undesirable inhabitants, among whom violence and robbery abound.

¹⁰¹ Nine of the ten letters were written on the *Harleston* between 10 March and 12 April 1812, while the tenth and final letter was written in London and dated 28 September 1812.

¹⁰² After a century of controlling the spice trade from Banten close to Batavia on Java, the British East India Company established Bencoolen as a new commercial center for the pepper trade in 1685, ousting other European presence in the vicinity and subjugating the local Malay ruler. Fort Marlborough was built nearby in 1714 to support this trade. By the early 19th century, British control over pepper began to wane, and the British Crown traded their possessions on Sumatra to the Netherlands in exchange for control over the Malay peninsula and Singapore as part of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. See: M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: C. 1300 to the Present*, Macmillan Asian Histories Series (London: Macmillan, 1981).

¹⁰³ Benjamin Heyne, *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India; With Journals of Several Tours Through Various Parts of the Peninsula: Also, an Account of Sumatra, in a Series of Letters* (London: Black, Parry, and Co. Booksellers to the Hon. East India Company, 1814), 368.

¹⁰⁴ Staunton notes that physicians working in Batavia witnessed foreigners frequently experiencing fever soon after their arrival. "[The] sole medicine administered, was a solution of camphor in spirit of wine, of which a table-

Upon first sight of Sumatra, Heyne writes the island's "beauty and grandeur of appearance surpasses any I have yet seen." The long and tedious sea journey was made worthwhile due to "the finest prospect imaginable, for the coast of Sumatra is certainly the richest I ever saw in my life. [...] It is in my opinion highly deserving the attention of the natural philosopher, as well as of the general observer." In describing the various regions of Sumatra, which he claims is called *Andelo* by locals though he does not provide a deeper discussion of this name, he writes:

What would I not give for another view of Sumatra, [...] and of the variegated scenes with which it abounds, and the singular productions of nature. [...] To compare the whole [of Sumatra] to a rich Persian carpet, to a fanciful landscape drawing, pictured in even the liveliest colours, would be detraction from what it is in reality.¹⁰⁵

Heyne's flattering description above paints Sumatra as a rich tapestry boasting "cloud-capt" mountains surrounded by "the densest verdure."¹⁰⁶ His praise for the region is tethered to his vantage point from the sea – in other words, at a safe distance from those he may encounter on land.

As a trading center and British colony, Bencoolen was home to diverse communities from across the region. Heyne took particular notice of Chinese merchants (who "much like the Jews, [are] always and every where the same"), the large population of craftsmen and servants from Bengal (Muslims who "intermarry with the Malays; and soon lose themselves so far, that their progeny look, act, and speak like other Malays"), and enslaved Black peoples who, altogether with

spoonful was taken, occasionally, in a glass of water." Camphor was believed to be "the most powerful antiseptic known," and it was "proper to trust to it, by a rule more simple even than Moliere's, and to exhibit it in every variety and period of the complaint." Dutch botanist Friedrich Miquel documented camphor in the 1850s as a valuable preservation agent to embalm the corpses of Batak chiefs in Sumatra. Of camphor's value to Batak death rituals, he wrote: "treasures are spent for [this] purpose." See: Sir George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China [...]* (London: W. Bulmer & Co, 1797), 243; Benjamin Heyne, *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India; With Journals of Several Tours Through Various Parts of the Peninsula: Also, an Account of Sumatra, in a Series of Letters* (London: Black, Parry, and Co. Booksellers to the Hon. East India Company, 1814), 63.

¹⁰⁵ Heyne, *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India; With Journals of Several Tours Through Various Parts of the Peninsula: Also, an Account of Sumatra, in a Series of Letters*, 395–96.

¹⁰⁶ Heyne, 396, 395.

local Malays and British colonial administrators and civil servants, made up the social world of British Bencoolen.¹⁰⁷ Most of the content in his letters on Sumatra, however, involves descriptions of Malays, whom he claims are Sumatra's coastal "natives," and their character. Of the Malays, he writes they are "Mahometans, or a sect of that religion, for among the Mussulmen in India they would hardly be acknowledged as truly faithful."¹⁰⁸ This statement of the inferior Islamic faith in Malay communities reflects a common belief held by European outsiders at the time that local forms of Islam were Islamic on the surface only.¹⁰⁹ Southeast Asians were assumed to be passive consumers of Islamic knowledge emerging from western regions where Islam's influence was considered more easily identifiable. As such, the localization of Islam was largely ignored by European writers when constructing their narratives of historical Islamization in Southeast Asia, and Heyne's judgment of Malays as "hardly [...] faithful," particularly when compared to "other" Muslims, was not uncommon within colonial scholarship.

In addition to their depiction as inadequate Muslims, Heyne characterizes Malay peoples as a "dastardly, treacherous, piratical horde of savages, in the best of whom, no faith nor confidence can be placed." He continues to write that when faced with adversity, the Malay (whom he

¹⁰⁷ Heyne, 386–87; Travel accounts such as Heyne's letters are far from representative of the larger social network that made up British Bencoolen. In Anand Yang's 2021 book, Bengkulu is examined as a critical node within the British imperial carceral regime in the Indian Ocean. Elevating the voices of Indian *bandwars* (convicts) sent to distant lands, Yang expands our understanding of historical Bengkulu as part of Britain's colonial strategy in Asia. See: Anand A. Yang, *Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia*, 1st ed., vol. 31 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).

¹⁰⁸ Heyne, *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India; With Journals of Several Tours Through Various Parts of the Peninsula: Also, an Account of Sumatra, in a Series of Letters*, 391.

¹⁰⁹ The multi-volume Dutch *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsche-Indie* attests to this common misconception. In an ethnographic article titled "Minangkabauers," this 1918 text describes the Minang peoples of western Sumatra as "Mohammedanen, but have only very little understanding of the *wesen* [essence, true nature] of Islam." Dr. Wolfgang Linser kindly introduced me to this article and provided a translation. See: S. de Graff and D.G. Stibbe, eds., *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsche-Indie* ('s-Gravenhage; Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff; N.V. v/h. E.J. Brill, 1918), 743–45.

persistently overgeneralizes in his account) will omit important pieces of information that would assist in a logical cause and effect relationship:

A [Malay] merchant or a captain of a ship, who meets with cruel treatment at a place, vociferates his complaints and sufferings wherever he goes, but carefully avoids mentioning the causes which subjected him to that ill treatment. He forgets to mention that he seduced the wife of the man who attempted to creese (stab) him; or that he fired at and killed some half-starved wretches, whom he observed pilfering some handfuls of rice, and in consequence he cannot appear in public without danger; [...] These are all things that have actually happened, and to some of my acquaintance.¹¹⁰

In Heyne's characterization, Malay peoples are untrustworthy and manipulative narrators. He continues that some favorite amusements include plundering, drinking palm wine or other liquor, consuming opium and tobacco, and gambling. On the latter vice, he writes that "the Malays are the most determinate gamblers in the world: they will hazard every thing in their possession on a battle in which a favourite cock is engaged, and as a last stake even their families themselves."¹¹¹ Later comparing the "emotional" Malay habit of gambling with "logical" European gambling, Heyne further constructs his image of the Malay as illogical, too.

Heyne's letters from 1812 expose the contradictory language used to evaluate Malay peoples by these employees of the British East India Company. At times "warlike" and other times "cowardly," Heyne wrote that "to judge from their propensity to assassinate and poison, and [...] in their taking opium to intoxication, they certainly cannot possess much natural courage."¹¹² These depictions of violence are at odds with the simultaneous representations of Malays peoples as unthreatening Muslims ("hardly [...] faithful"). Chaotic behaviors such as these have been

¹¹⁰ Heyne, *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India; With Journals of Several Tours Through Various Parts of the Peninsula: Also, an Account of Sumatra, in a Series of Letters*, 391.

¹¹¹ Heyne, 392. While perhaps an extrapolation, this description brings to my mind Yudhistira's gambling vice in the Mahabharata stories circulating South and Southeast Asia – he, too, gambled his fate as well as that of his wife and brothers in a game of dice. Given Heyne's twenty years with the EIC in India, he was certainly familiar with these stories.

¹¹² Heyne, 394.

discussed as part of European imperial strategy to denounce Islamic authority in the Middle East and Asia, pushing a narrative of the violent, unpredictable, and emotional Other.¹¹³

Heyne's characterizations contribute to colonial narratives that denigrated Malay peoples as treacherous and rapacious, best exemplified in the image of the Malay pirate. As Stefan Amirell demonstrates in his work, the formation of Malay identity as a race predisposed to piracy emerged in the mid-18th century at a moment when European commercial interests in Southeast Asia increased. This shift was also part of existing European biases against non-settled or non-agricultural populations, the lifestyles of many indigenous groups across maritime Southeast Asia at the time.¹¹⁴ The assumption that Malays were natural pirates emerged as a frequently used justification for colonial violence and domination in the Malay archipelago in the name of anti-piracy. The 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty for example, which distributed British and Dutch imperial claims across Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, identified piracy as a dominant threat in the Straits region, declaring no protection for pirates and placing restrictions on the sale of "pirated" goods. Treaties such as this one positioned the Malay sailor and the Malay *prahu* (boating vessel) as threats to European trading companies operating in maritime Southeast Asia, thereby excluding local actors from participating in what was an important aspect of their livelihood. This shift towards a racialized Malay propensity for violence lays the foundation for broad claims such as the following from Secretary to the British Ambassador George Staunton, discussed in this section's beginning:

It is among the advantages of the European seas, that at least the subjects of the great powers, may navigate safely through them, without any other protection than that of a pass against Barbary corsairs. In the Chinese seas, force alone can insure the safety of navigators.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹¹⁴ Stefan Eklöf Amirell, *Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Stefan Eklöf Amirell, "The Making of the 'Malay Pirate' in Early Modern European Thought," *Humanities (Basel)* 9, no. 3 (2020): 91–104, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030091>.

¹¹⁵ Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China [...]*, 597.

Decades later, British anthropologist Walter William Skeat wrote in his ethnography *Malay Magic* in 1900:

In spite of the halo of romance thrown round it in native writings, Malay warfare (in modern times, at least) has never been anything but the barest and most bloodthirsty piracy by sea, and the merest “bushwhacking” and stockade-fighting on land; its final suppression, even if in some degree it should involve a slackening of fibre in the Malay character, is not a matter for regret.¹¹⁶

The words that foreign writers used in their depictions of Malay peoples and traditions are not insignificant choices. They contributed to the persistent Othering of Malays by British writers and their racialized subjugation at a time when European imperial powers sought to lay claim to their indigenous lands and waters. Such descriptions also produced inaccurate assumptions regarding the depth of Islam amongst Malay communities; dismantling this troubling narrative remains an important aspect in local Malay cultural production to this day. Staunton and Heyne, writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, elected to contrast effusive descriptions of Sumatra’s geophysical situation with their racist depictions of local peoples. The legacy of works such as these produced an obsession with Sumatra’s natural history, a trend that valued Sumatra’s fauna and flora far beyond that of local Malay lives and livelihoods.

IV. TO MEASURE IN GOLD: SUMATRA’S BOTANICAL WEALTH

While writers like Staunton and Heyne spent pages of their accounts commenting on Malay peoples for the entertainment of an English-reading audience to be enjoyed at a “safe” distance, the fascination that these writers felt towards the natural environment on and around the island of Sumatra greatly influenced a subsequent wave of travelers to the region. Botanists and naturalist collectors flocked to Sumatra in the hopes of finding, documenting, and transporting samples of

¹¹⁶ Walter William Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Macmillan and Co., limited, 1900), 532, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47873/47873-h/47873-h.htm#pb17>.

Sumatran flora via ship to their home countries. The understanding of Sumatran landscapes that these travelers brought with them was in large part formed by William Marsden, an Irishman employed by the EIC in 1771 who became principal secretary to the British colonial administration at Fort Marlborough, Bencoolen. Returning to England eight years later, Marsden wrote *The History of Sumatra* (1783), which would become the first English-language book of its kind on the island's cultural and natural history.¹¹⁷ His writings as an Orientalist scholar and Malay linguist granted Marsden his place as an elected member of the Royal Society.

Marsden's depictions of Sumatra loomed large in the imagination of a new generation of botanists who journeyed to the region in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The John Howard Papers at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew Archive in London is one example that illustrates the efforts made by botanists to piece together a greater understanding of Sumatra's natural landscape and the land's potential for agriculture. Among this collection is an English translation of the Dutch *Flora van Nederlandsch Indie*, written by Dutch botanist Friedrich Anton Wilhelm Miquel (1811-1871) and published as three volumes between 1855 and 1859. A part of Miquel's documentation of Sumatra was translated into English by British botanist George Benthham in 1860 for his peers, and these translated notes are now held in Kew's John Howard collection. The act of this handwritten translation reveals the importance that the British placed on knowledge collected by the Dutch, especially as the Dutch had been visiting and writing about the Indies for centuries prior to the period of British control in Sumatra. The ideas about Malay peoples and cultures that fill the

¹¹⁷ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra: Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, with a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of That Island*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: Thomas Payne and Son; Benjamin White; James Robson; P. Elmsly; Leigh and Sotheby; and J. Sewell, 1783).

English language records relied upon the documentation prepared and distributed by the Dutch (and other Europeans) before them.¹¹⁸

Bentham wrote his translation in cursive on unlined paper, now browned with age. Pools of ink periodically blot the pages, indicating where Bentham paused in his writing. In *Flora van Nederlandsch Indie*, Miquel relies upon other Sumatran expeditions prior to his own to complete his illustration of the island, namely those conducted by Salomon Müller, Pieter Willem Korthals, Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn, and of course William Marsden.¹¹⁹ He writes detailed notes on the geography, topography, and cultivation of Sumatra, which he describes as a “mighty boundary wall to the west of the Indian Archipelago,” a “continuous mountain chain” with powerful rivers traversing a terrain of “widespread volcanism.”¹²⁰ Along with climate, rainfall, and wind patterns, Miquel provides descriptions of the crops that can and have been cultivated by Europeans in Sumatra, expressing that Sumatra could surpass even Java in agricultural importance for European empire, if it were further explored. His writing suggests a more extensive imperial trans-oceanic exchange, such as with jute, indigenous to Sumatra and Bengal, that was shipped to Java to be woven into coffee sacks. He notes that certain crops, especially coffee, are deserving of careful consideration “as we may here recognize at once a powerful opportunity [in] the commercial development of Sumatra.”¹²¹ Miquel’s work takes the form of a long list of resources, quotidian

¹¹⁸ While not the focus of this chapter, there is much to be studied regarding the interaction between Dutch and British produced knowledge about Malay peoples.

¹¹⁹ Saloman Müller was a naturalist and a member of *Natuurkundige Commissie* (Commission for Natural Sciences), a committee that collected information about the natural resources of the Dutch East Indies in the mid-19th century; he visited western Sumatra from 1833-35 and his account was published in 1855. Pieter Willem Korthals was a botanist with the Dutch East Indies between 1831-36; his account of Sumatra was published in 1839. Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn enlisted as a medical doctor with the Dutch East Indies; his writings are considered the first anthropological and topographical study of Batak lands in northeastern Sumatra, published in 1847.

¹²⁰ Miquel, “Geography and Vegetation of Sumatra (Bentham’s Translation of the Introduction to *Flora van Nederlandsch Indie*),” 4. Per note 88, “Indian Archipelago” in this source means the Malay archipelago.

¹²¹ Miquel, 68.

and luxury alike, that were mined or grown successfully in Sumatra at that time, such as the gold mines attributed to “Menangkabo” [West Sumatra] lands around Padang, nutmeg, clove, and camphor.¹²²

Discussion of camphor, as mentioned above, described a product that “from very ancient times [has] given celebrity to the island,” illustrating the level of European awe and interest in Sumatra’s flora.¹²³ Indigenous to the islands of Borneo and Sumatra, the name camphor comes from the Malay *kapur Barus* (chalk of Barus), suggestive of its chalky white color (*kapur*) and its connection to Barus, an old port city on the western coast of modern-day North Sumatra province. Commonly used for its scent in religious ceremonies, for its utility as a topical medicine, and in some cases as a preservation agent to embalm the dead, camphor was in demand across Asia and the Middle East. Sumatra’s camphor was a more potent variety than the camphor grown elsewhere – in surviving medieval Arab navigational texts, *Riyahi* camphor from Fansur (an old name for Barus) is noted as the best type.¹²⁴ At the time of Miquel’s writing in the mid-19th century, camphor would fetch a high price for those trading in the region. In Marco Polo’s account of his travels in Sumatra in the late 13th century, we learn that camphor was so highly valued that it was measured in gold.¹²⁵ Marco Polo’s early account of camphor inspired W.H. de Vriese, a French professor of botany at the University of Leiden, to further praise the plant, writing in 1856: “*Les camphriers*

¹²² Miquel, 9.

¹²³ Miquel, 59.

¹²⁴ Reference is from Sulaiman al-Mahri’s *Minhaj*. See: Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese, Being a Translation of Kitāb al-Fawā’id Fī Usūl al-Bahr Wa’l-Qawā’id of Ahmad b. Mājid al-Najdī*, 490.

¹²⁵ In his essay on the history of camphor, de Vriese writes: “Il parait que Marco-Paolo a été le premier, qui ait fait quelque mention du camphre de Sumatra, dans la partie du récit de son voyage, où il donne la description des royaumes de cette îlle, nommément dans le chapitre qui traite du pays de Fansur, où il en parle en ces termes: ‘C’est ici que croit la meilleure espèce de Canfara fansuri, que l’on estime plus que les autres espèces; en effet on la vend au poids de l’or.’” W.H. de Vriese, “Memoir on Camphor of Sumatra and Borneo (Mémoire sur le Camphrier de Sumatra et de Bornéo)” (Brill, 1856), 2–3, John Howard Papers, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

sont non seulement les arbres les plus précieux, mais aussi les plus magnifiques, qu'on ait jamais vus [Camphor is not only the most precious of trees but also the most magnificent that one has ever seen].¹²⁶ De Vriese states that his interest lies in the history and the botanical elements of the camphor plant, but that much work remains to understand the various uses of the plant and its derivative products. The esteem de Vriese holds for this plant is clear in his chosen epigraph, an excerpt from the 16th century Portuguese epic poem, *Os Lusíadas* [The Lusiads], written by Portugal's national poet Luís Vas de Camões:

Borneo here expands her ample breast,
By Nature's hand in woods of Camphire drest;
The precious liquid weeping from the trees
Glows warm with health, the balsom of disease.¹²⁷

Further botanical interest in camphor in the 19th and early 20th centuries is found among the Henry Ridley Papers at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew Archive. Ridley, a British botanist whose capitalist industrialization of the rubber plant on the Malay Peninsula earned him the moniker "Mad Ridley," joined the cadre of foreign natural scientists who traversed Sumatra to document unique specimens of flora and to collect samples; for Ridley, he ventured on tropical botanical expeditions to Sumatra under the auspices of the United States Malay Association to provide his opinion on issues related to plants and agriculture.¹²⁸ Based on two voyages to Sumatra in 1899 and 1920, Ridley's handwritten "Essay on Sumatra" boasts 400-500 collected species during these visits, 82 of which were "new to science," a Eurocentric claim that indicates species previously unknown amongst European botanists, but hardly unknown to local Malays.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Vriese, 13 (my translation).

¹²⁷ This English translation was done in 1778 by William Mickle. The poem was written in Homeric style and is often compared to Virgil's *Aeneid*. It celebrates Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route to India.

¹²⁸ After his last journey to Sumatra in 1920, Ridley was advised against travel outside of England due to severe scurvy.

¹²⁹ Henry Ridley, "Essay on Sumatra" (1897), 98, Henry Ridley Papers, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Ridley annotates his journeys to Sumatra in a handwritten piece titled “Essay on Sumatra.” Included in his documentation is Sumatran camphor, described as “an immense tree often 120 feet tall or more with fragrant white flowers and a round fruit with five long wings.” Ridley continues, “It is [...] one of the few gregarious trees in the Malay peninsula forming almost pure forest.”¹³⁰ He contrasts Sumatran camphor with its East Asian variant (*Dryobalanops aromatica* versus *Cinnamomum camphora*), writing that the latter was “not so highly valued as that of Malaya which is so expensive that it has rarely been brought into Europe.” Citing Garcia da Orta, a Sephardic Jewish physician and naturalist who lived and experimented in Portuguese India in the 16th century, Ridley writes that “the best [Sumatran camphor] was valued at 80 pardaus a pound, a pardau being worth 10 Spanish reals about equal to five shillings, altogether £20 and a pound of it was worth 100 pounds of Chinese camphor” [emphasis added].¹³¹ The attention to camphor given by Ridley, de Vriese, and Miquel illuminate the special place that Sumatran camphor held for natural scientists in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a luxury trade commodity.¹³² Such esteem is in part drawn from the long history of Sumatran camphor in circulation around the Indian Ocean world:

This camphor was the first kind known, the earliest mention of It being in the poems of Inrul-kais, an Arabian prince who lived at Hadramaut in the sixth century. It was then highly valued as a perfume, and the Arabian writers of that date said that it came from a place in Sumatra called Kansur, or Kanfur which is probably the spot called Barus nowadays and the Malayan camphor is known as Kapur Barus by the Malay to this day, and the name Camphor is derived from the old word Kamfur.¹³³

¹³⁰ This species of camphor is local to Sumatra, Borneo, and the Malay Peninsula. Though Ridley mentions the Malay peninsula in this passage, he wrote his comments on camphor from his observations in and around Medan in northeastern Sumatra.

¹³¹ Ridley, “Essay on Sumatra,” 16–17.

¹³² Fantastic stories surround camphor as a miracle plant and its assumed economic potential. By 1913 however, a Dutch treatise by K. Heyne proclaimed that despite the lore surrounding Sumatran camphor, the plant had no future economic prospect and the price would inevitably drop due to its competition with the much cheaper eastern Asian variety. See: K. Heyne, *De Nuttige Planten van Indonesie, in Twee Deelen* (’s-Gravenhage; Bandung: N.V. Uitgeverij; W. van Hoeve, 1950), 1105. My sincere thanks to Dr. Wolfgang Linser for introducing me to this text and for his willingness to translate and share his extensive knowledge of historical agricultural development in Indonesia.

¹³³ Ridley, “Essay on Sumatra,” 16.

In his essay, Ridley credits English naturalists for documenting what was known of Sumatra's flora within European academic society. The Dutch, he claims, paid little attention to Sumatran botany, and Ridley makes several references to what he saw as Dutch apathy towards botanical inquiry. A reader must be extremely cautious of generalizing statements such as these. Ridley was writing for an intended audience of potential investors. Downplaying the role of other European expertise greatly served his business interests. Contradictions of Ridley's assessment abound in the historical record. In the extensive Dutch bibliography collection *Repetitorium op de Koloniale Litteratuur* compiled by J.C. Hookyaas in 1877, almost 100 entries relate to descriptions of Sumatra – an indication of what was known and circulating about Sumatra by 1865, much earlier than when Ridley was writing.¹³⁴

Ridley was invited to Sumatra by a fellow botanist to give his opinion on a timber concession at the head of the Siak River, and Ridley endeavored to collect botanical samples along his journey (see Figure 1.1).¹³⁵ His travel notes follow a familiar pattern. Praise of Sumatra's natural beauty starkly contrasts any description of local peoples and customs. Of the Siak River, Ridley writes a lavish description:

The river is quite deep and the water black and quite smooth unruffled by breezes without a ripple, so that the reflections of the banks and foliage of the trees and scrubs on the edge are as clear as if [...] in a mirror. Every leaf and flower is clearly visible, and it is hardly possible to see where a tree bank ends and its reflection begins. I have never seen anything as striking as this in the way of the water-mirror in any part of the world elsewhere, except once on the river Thet near Thetford in Norfolk but even that was not as clear as that in the deep black river of Siak.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ J.C. Hookyaas, ed., *Repetitorium Op de Koloniale Litteratuur: Of Systematische Inhoudsopgaaf van Hetgen Voorkommt over de Koloniën (Beoosten de Kaap)*, in *Mengelwerken En Tijdschriften, van 1595 Tot 1865 Uitgegeven, in Nederland En Zijne Overzeesche Bezittingen*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen & Zoon, 1877). This collection contains over 4,000 entries related to the Dutch colonies. Entries 478-573 include descriptions of Sumatra "to the extent that it is now known" when published in 1877. Most of these descriptions are from Dutch sources, but several in English and French are also included. I am indebted to Dr. Wolfgang Linser for assisting me in accessing and translating material from this text.

¹³⁵ In addition to his botanical endeavors in Sumatra, Ridley was "regaled [...] with whisky and cigars" by the Sultan of Siak at a time when the Sultanate and palace grounds were under construction. Ridley, "Essay on Sumatra," 2.

¹³⁶ Ridley, 3.

Lined with dense forest on either side, the Siak River “has never been touched or interfered with by man, except near the mouth, [...] a very good sample of primitive Sumatran plants.”¹³⁷ Ridley’s travelogue includes descriptions of local flora – ginger, orchids, and mosses mostly – and provides some comparison for their monetary worth; some of the mosses, Ridley claims, could have been sold for 100 pounds in England, the same price for which the entire timber concession he evaluated would eventually sell. Comingled with Sumatra’s diverse flora is the island’s almost fantastical fauna. Crocodiles, freshwater sharks, wild boars, and tigers roamed the rivers and the forests, periodically terrorizing local villages so much that the forest became “prison over all.”¹³⁸



Figure 1.1: Relief map of the island of Sumatra, showing the rivers that flow eastward, the Siak River amongst them. The Malay Peninsula is positioned opposite the Strait of Melaka to the northeast.

Source: “Indonesia Sumatra relief location map” by *RXerself*, Wikimedia Commons, under License [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Ridley interrupts his illustration of Sumatra’s dangerous beauty with frequent condescension of local life along the Straits. Ridley describes the boats he would often take as some of the “filthiest [...] ever seen,” with cockroaches among the “largest and most lively [he] ever saw.” Providing a list of cargo contents – durian, dried fish, and pigs – Ridley writes that the

¹³⁷ Ridley, 11.

¹³⁸ Ridley, 8.

local aromas combined with the Malay and Chinese peoples on board “produced a vareed [*sic*] and appalling stench.” Several lines of his journal are dedicated to “blackau,” by which he means *belacan*, a local specialty of “shrimp, pounded up and then fermented into a peculiar state of decomposition.” A quintessential flavor of Malay food, many would disagree with Ridley’s review of *belacan* as “truly loathsome.”¹³⁹ Such descriptions of olfactory offense and assumptions of poor hygiene prescribe to colonial rhetoric of racialized difference and white supremacy. Scholars like historian Jonathan Reinarz discuss the formation of an odorless whiteness, against which any aroma or odor physically and sensorially marks the Other.¹⁴⁰ As Ridley’s disgust makes apparent, smell – of individual people and of food – is often used to disparage non-white cultures and peoples.

Another item in the Ridley Papers is his “Book of Travels,” in which Ridley compiles his personal recollections detailing 17 years of oceanic voyages between 1887 and 1904.¹⁴¹ During this time, Ridley passed through the British convict island Fernando de Noronha off the eastern coast of Brazil in 1887 and continued to the British settlements on Sumatra, Borneo, and the Malay Peninsula.¹⁴² Handwritten in clean cursive, Ridley compiled and rewrote accounts of his travels that were originally confined to his personal notebooks (such as his “Essay on Sumatra” discussed above, a more hastily written field log).

¹³⁹ Ridley, 1.

¹⁴⁰ Jonathan Reinarz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell*, Studies in Sensory History (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2014); William Tullett, “Grease and Sweat: Race and Smell in Eighteenth-Century English Culture,” *Cultural and Social History* 13, no. 3 (2016): 307–22. Literary scholar Carol LaPerle and architectural historian Arijit Sen are especially helpful in deepening our understanding of racialized smell in literature and the urban landscapes that surround us. See: Carol Mejia LaPerle, “Race, Affect, and the Olfactory,” *Medium - The Sundial Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (blog), August 16, 2019, <https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/race-affect-and-the-olfactory-f69659deab04>; Arijit Sen, *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City*, 21st Century Studies (Indiana University Press, 2013).

¹⁴¹ Henry Ridley, “Book of Travels” (1912 1887), Henry Ridley Papers, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

¹⁴² Ridley’s entries include descriptions of Fernando de Noronha (Brazil); Pahang, Perak, and Johor (peninsular Malaysia); Siak (Sumatra, Indonesia); and British North Borneo (Sabah, Malaysia).

Among the various encounters detailed in Ridley's travelogue is his meeting with the Sultan of Pahang, Ahmad Al-Mu'azzam Shah, at Pulau Tawar in 1900.¹⁴³ Also in attendance at this meeting with the Sultan was his travel companion Davison. Having returned from Siak, Sumatra to the Malay Peninsula in July of that year, Ridley found himself conducting his observational research on yet another body of water. Pulau Tawar straddles the banks of the Pahang River just south of its confluence between the Tembeling and Jelai rivers. Once combined into the Pahang River, the water flows southeast and empties into the South China Sea by Pekan, an historic seat of Malay royalty. To approach the Sultan's palace, Ridley and his small travel party were rowed down the Pahang River, landing by the village which he described as "entirely one vast harem of common houses." Writing in shock that the very spot where they landed was "in the harem" (original emphasis), Ridley explains for his readers that the Sultan, "an atrocious ruffian," indulged in "a vast number of wives," whom he "only entertained once & then they had to live in these houses for the rest of their lives." Of his invitation to the palace in Pulau Tawar, Ridley writes: "At this place we visited the Sultan of Pahang [...] and went to 'tea' with him."¹⁴⁴ Distinguishing "tea" in parentheses in this way reveals Ridley's suspicion of the Sultan's tea service, unsubtly assuming inferiority.

Whatever his expectations for tea may have been, Ridley was in enough awe of his encounter at the Sultan's palace to describe it colorfully in his written account. He details his meeting with the Sultan as follows:

[...] we were escorted to a large room with carpets on the floor and the only furniture, a bath chair, a bird cage with no bird in it, and wooden boxes (containing gold dust) [...]. Davison who had been at Indian rajah's palaces, expected to be presently led into some magnificent room to meet a gorgeously dressed Rajah, and

¹⁴³ Prior to his accession, Ahmad (formerly known as Tun Wan Ahmad) was the sixth and last Raja Bendahara of Pahang. He founded the Pahang Sultanate in 1881. For more detail about the ruling houses of Pahang and Johor and their colonial entanglements with the British, see: J. de Silva, "British Relations With Pahang, 1884-1895," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 35, no. 1 (197) (1962): 1-50.

¹⁴⁴ Ridley, "Book of Travels," 258.

began whirling round saying I suppose we are to sit down here, and backed into the Sultan who was very plainly clad. I recognized him from a photograph I had seen [...]. We were invited to sit on the carpets, the Sultan apologizing for the absence of chairs. Really he delighted to see Europeans squatting uncomfortably on the ground so never supplied chairs or seats. We were served with aromatic coffee, (utterly unlike coffee but highly spiced) from an ornamental jug. Chicken liver pies of two layers of crust with chicken's liver between a large flat pie cut into strips, sweetmeats which except some sugared tapioca were not sweet but musky & aromatic. I liked these as they gave an Arabian night's flavor to the entertainment.¹⁴⁵

In this passage, we see a familiar pattern unfolding, one that generalizes vast Malay peoples into a single image of inferiority, decadence, and manipulation. Davison assumes that the Malay kings are as opulent as the South Asian kingdoms under the British Raj. His and Ridley's surprise that Sultan Ahmad was instead "plainly clad" is tinged with disappointment, hinting that the Sultan did not live up to the splendor to which the English had grown accustomed in British India. Judging the coffee as "utterly unlike coffee," Ridley positions his personal taste in coffee as superior to local preparations of the drink. Malay custom is relegated to an inferior position in relation to white English custom as well as to South Asian custom, elucidating a hierarchy of cultural superiority propagated by the English that we see mirrored in colonial and postcolonial representations of Southeast Asian subjects as "lesser than" their counterparts in South Asia.

Attire and beverage aside, the Sultan's reception of Ridley's party did not lack in luxury: gold dust filled wooden boxes left on display and a variety of foods were prepared with expensive sugar and spices, including chicken liver pies and sweetmeats. Ridley's review of the sweetmeats in particular belies his conviction of exotic decadence. Using adjectives like "musky" and "aromatic," Ridley claims these edibles lent "an Arabian night's flavor to the entertainment." In just one sentence, Ridley superimposes a generalized image of the Middle East – one that is deeply perfumed, sensual, and rich – onto the Malay world.¹⁴⁶ Ridley's indiscriminate layering of

¹⁴⁵ Ridley, 258–60.

¹⁴⁶ In engaging this description ("an Arabian night's flavor"), Ridley may evoke for some readers (as he did for me) the tales spun by Scheherazade to stay her execution, compiled as *One Thousand and One Nights* and often simplified in English as *The Arabian Nights*.

exotified decadence participates in the production of generalized Malayness that is reflected in other textual portrayals of Malay peoples and places across colonial-era travel writing.

This passage in “Book of Travels” also contributes to the racialized depiction of Malays as manipulative. Writing that the Sultan actually “delighted to see Europeans squatting uncomfortably on the ground so never supplied chairs or seats,” Ridley portrays the Sultan as intentionally inconveniencing his foreign guests for his own amusement. Continuing to distrust the Sultan, Ridley writes about a local chief whom the Sultan assigned to them as a “guide” (Ridley’s parenthetical emphasis), complaining that “this man however knew nothing about the upper part of the country and was really sent with us to prevent the Malays from giving us any help and to obstruct us as much as possible.”¹⁴⁷ Ridley justifies his suspicion of this arrangement by citing a rising rebellion in the region against the British. He was of the belief that the Sultan assumed he and his party were spies surveying the territory for the British, making his offer of aid disingenuous.

We have seen dishonesty employed before to portray Malay qualities. Just as George Staunton described in his account an incident of local Malay leaders lying (or so Staunton claimed) to avoid accountability for murder (see Part III), Ridley too includes an anecdote that presumes a Malay tendency to blame others. Here Ridley describes the Sultan orchestrating the death of a man accused of winking at one of his wives:

[he] had been ordered to join a hunting party, who while he was drinking at the river, thrust him thru with a spear and cast him into the stream. [...] He [the Sultan] said “the Sakai there are very bad the other day they killed one of my men, [...]” I know not the meaning of this which was a hint to the DO that his defense to the murder charges was that the Sakai did it.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Ridley, “Book of Travels,” 260.

¹⁴⁸ Ridley, 304.

In including this anecdote, Ridley chooses to further a particular narrative of Malays as dishonest and manipulative, a racist and racialized characterization of Malay peoples that runs through colonial representations of Southeast Asian Muslims. Ridley's assessment of the Sultan of Pahang is not too dissimilar from George Staunton's description of local leaders along Sumatra's southeastern coast or from Benjamin Heyne's notes on Bencoolen discussed earlier. Similarly, Ridley's low opinion of Malay morality and trustworthiness mirror Heyne's earlier opinion of Malay peoples as a "dastardly, treacherous, piratical horde of savages, in the best of whom, no faith nor confidence can be placed" (see Part III).

It is worth considering whether the inclusion of such accounts, filled as they are with bigotry, places undue importance on the words of racist white men. This chapter engages with their words not to elevate their importance, but rather to elucidate a particular pattern of representing Malay peoples that left a lasting impression on global understandings of Malayness. The misrepresentation of Malay peoples as a monolithic racialized category projects dangerous assumptions about cultural inferiority and poor character. These descriptions stand in full opposition to the enthusiasm and grace afforded to Malay landscapes, the archipelagic fauna and flora. This preference – of natural resources over people – helps us to understand the construction of racist myths and imagery that surround a place like Sumatra. Such misrepresentations form the framework that many Malay Muslims today work to dismantle through channels like the arts, making space for their own self-representations regionally and internationally.

Through Ridley's encounter with Sultan Ahmad, we traveled across the Strait of Melaka and through the densely forested Malay Peninsula to its eastern province of Pahang. While this dissertation focuses on representation of Sumatra, Ridley's passage is an enlightening source as it demonstrates how the British generalized Malay peoples from across the archipelagic region into

a single category. British encounters with Malay Muslim sultanates like that between Ridley and Ahmad – regardless of local differentiation – contributed to the fabrication of a singular, static Malay race, one that was exotic but dangerous, Muslim but not Muslim enough, indulgent but not as lavish as India. In what remains of this chapter, the implications of such misrepresentation will be discussed in relation to cultural identity formation and knowledge production.

V. ‘STRANGELY WANTING IN ATTRACTION’: COLONIAL HAUNTINGS ON MALAY IDENTITY

The early British explorers and naturalists who journeyed to Sumatra laid the foundation for representing Sumatra as a desirable destination full of undesirable inhabitants. The written examples discussed above may have functioned primarily as accounts of navigation, exploration, or naturalist observation, but they also model the old ethnographic style of early anthropology. The old style prioritizes an encyclopedic approach of gathering information, one in which “groups” are defined with clear edges and static traditions based on research conducted by an individual outsider writing up his/her analysis far away from the host community.¹⁴⁹ With a common goal of helping other “outsiders” understand what the individual researcher has learned, this kind of ethnography directly contributed to the European imperialist project by studying those deemed uncivilized (non-white, ethnic Others) for the purpose of a more effective, tailored colonial strategy. Writings like those by Ridley, Heyne, and Staunton set the stage for how Malay peoples were represented in outsider reports about them (navigational logs, diary entries, botanical surveys, etc.), reports that produced a kind of knowledge about others in order to better subjugate them.

The work of Walter William Skeat, a British anthropologist and civil servant stationed in the Federated Malay States in the 1890s who dedicated his career to the study of Malay folklore,

¹⁴⁹ Michael Agar, “Ethnography Reconstructed,” in *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996), 1–51.

is an interesting site to explore these ideas further. Skeat's first book titled *Malay Magic* was published in 1900. Its preface, written by Skeat's contemporary Charles Otto Blagden, reads:

[...] speaking generally, there can be no doubt that an understanding of the ideas and modes of thought of an alien people in a relatively low stage of civilisation facilitates very considerably the task of governing them; and in the Malay Peninsula that task has now devolved mainly upon Englishmen.¹⁵⁰

Written as a reflection on how ethnographic reports may have anticipated the 1857 “Indian Mutiny,” Blagden praises Skeat's work and others like it that aspire to “understand” colonial subjects to suppress rebellion against the British.¹⁵¹ While Skeat does not concern himself with governance, nor does he claim to relay information about Malay peoples from other regions across the Indian Ocean world, Blagden's opinion of the utility of Skeat's work means that the language choices in this text matter deeply. The representation of Malay peoples, customs, and characteristics in the text were written as definitive knowledge in line with other colonial ethnography, and it contributed to the production of disparaging ideas about Malayness that contrast a civilized whiteness and the racialized white prerogative to protect the natural environment from native inhabitants.

It is therefore significant that among Skeat's compilation of Malay stories of creation, religion, and quotidian activity is a commentary on Malay music and dance, copied from Frank Swettenham's 1895 *Malay Sketches*.¹⁵² He includes the following passage:

Malays are not dancers, but they pay professional performers to dance for their amusement, and consider that “the better part” is with those who watch, at their ease, the exertions of a small class, whose members are not held in the highest respect. The spectacle usually provided is strangely wanting in attraction: a couple of women shuffling their feet and swaying their hands in gestures that are practically devoid of grace or even variety—that is the Malay dance—and it is accompanied by the beating of native drums, the striking together of two short sticks held in either hand, and the occasional boom of a metal gong. The entertainment has an

¹⁵⁰ Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*, ix–x.

¹⁵¹ The events in 1857 that for many years were referred to as the Indian Mutiny are more recently described as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 or the First War of Independence to reflect a long tradition of resistance against British imperialist oppression. See: Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1983).

¹⁵² Frank Athelstane Swettenham, *Malay Sketches* (New York: John Lane ; Macmillan & Co., 1895).

undoubted fascination for Malays, but it generally forms part of a theatrical performance, and for Western spectators it is immeasurably dull.¹⁵³

In this passage, Swettenham offensively underestimates Malay peoples with his claim that “Malays are not dancers.” In declaring what they are *not*, Swettenham makes a tacit comparison with societies deemed culturally rich. This Eurocentric conceptualization of dance, one with an implied paradigm of classical and folk, esteems European practices as “high art” while relegating all other forms of performance to folk entertainment.¹⁵⁴ Swettenham continues to dismiss Malay performance in his assessment of it as “strangely wanting in attraction,” “practically devoid of grace or even variety,” and “immeasurably dull.”

Elsewhere, however, Swettenham alludes to a potential for beauty in Malay performance. In his essay “A Malay Nautch,” Swettenham describes a dance performance he witnessed in Pahang, an event singular enough for Swettenham to describe in detail in a lecture for the Royal Asiatic Society in 1878:

It was in the early part of 1875 that, being sent on a Mission to the Bandahara of Pahang, I witnessed, what I have never seen elsewhere in the Malay Peninsula or the Straits Settlements, a Malay Nautch.

I have of course, like most other people here I suppose, repeatedly witnessed Malays dancing and singing during the Muharam, especially in Penang; I have several times also been present at a Malay “Mayung,” a kind of theatrical performance, with some dancing and much so-called singing¹⁵⁵ [...]

Had the performance I now describe nearly resembled any of those commonly seen here, or in the Peninsula, there could be little interest in this description, but in the belief that the sight as I saw it is a rare one, seldom witnessed by Europeans, and so far undescribed, I have ventured to offer it, as it may, to some, be interesting.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*, 458.

¹⁵⁴ Dance scholar Theresa Buckland contests the Eurocentric foundation of dance studies, and her edited volume places emphasis on dance as cultural practice and the many ways of making histories and identities through bodily practices. See: Theresa Buckland, *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities* (Madison, WI, USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁵ Patricia Hardwick has written beautifully on the nuances of Mak Yong traditions in Malaysia. See: Patricia A. Hardwick, “Embodying the Divine and the Body Politic: Mak Yong Performance in Rural Kelantan, Malaysia,” in *Performance, Popular Culture, and Piety in Muslim Southeast Asia* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77–103.

¹⁵⁶ Frank A. Swettenham, “A Malay Nautch,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 2 (1878): 163. See footnote 78 above for a discussion of the term *nautch*.

Swettenham writes this account in a way that makes the very existence of Malay dance, a “Malay Nautch” as he writes it, seem like a rarity. Recalling his description quoted in *Malay Sketches* above (“a couple of women shuffling their feet and swaying their hands in gestures that are practically devoid of grace or even variety—that is the Malay dance”), Swettenham must have been impressed with the scene he witnessed that evening at the invitation of Sultan Ahmad, then the sixth Raja Bendahara of Pahang who would go on to become the founding Sultan of Pahang a few years later in 1881 – the very same ruler who hosted Henry Ridley for tea in 1900.

In this account, Swettenham describes an elaborate scene. At Ahmad’s “Balei” [*balai*] or hall attached to the leader’s palace, roughly 200 male spectators sat around a large carpet laid out for the dancers, four teenage girls “beautifully dressed in silk and cloth of gold.” He details their headdress: “On their heads they wore a large and curious but very pretty ornament, made principally of gold—a sort of square flower garden where all the flowers were gold, but of delicate workmanship, trembling and glittering with every movement of the wearer.”¹⁵⁷ Dancing barefoot, the young girls moved through the motions of *sembah* (offering): they “raised their hands in the act of “Sambah” or homage, and then began the nautch by swaying their bodies and slowly waving their arms and hands in the most graceful movements.” Swettenham describes the props they used: “Sometimes it was a fan or a glass they held, sometimes a flower or small vessel, but oftener their hands were empty, *as it is in the movement of the fingers that the chief art of Malay nautches consists*” (emphasis added).¹⁵⁸ This final statement presents a contradiction. While Swettenham begins his essay with the claim that he has never before seen a Malay dance (“I witnessed, what I have never seen elsewhere [...], a Malay Nautch”), he appears to know enough about Malay dance

¹⁵⁷ Swettenham, 164.

¹⁵⁸ Swettenham, 166.

traditions to declare that “the chief art” of this dance form is in its graceful hand gestures. That Swettenham could appreciate delicate hand gestures in a royal setting alongside the leader of Pahang but considers similar movements “wanting in attraction” when performed by everyday peoples should not be overlooked. It mirrors the manner in which European travelers described Malay lands as bountiful, rich, and beautiful but its inhabitants as undesirable. While Swettenham likely believed he was sharing his praise of Malay culture via his “Malay Nautch” story with the Royal Asiatic Society, he merely affirmed the British mindset that rigidly cast Malay peoples as uncivilized or exotic at the convenience of the onlooker’s aims. The exotifying nature of this passage elaborates upon the script that would later manifest in the stylized self-presentation of Mata Hari, the gilded silk-clad European figure who danced across the beginning pages of this chapter and whose metaphorical minstrelsy facilitated her cultural appropriation and misrepresentation.

The individuals highlighted in this chapter are all participants of British empire, and the impressions they chose to write down for perpetuity must be understood as part of the British colonial agenda. In viewing such individuals and their writings next to each other, this chapter acknowledges the reading of British archives “along the grain,” as modeled by Ann Stoler’s approach to Dutch colonial archives as sites of epistemological and political anxieties.¹⁵⁹ This chapter’s collection of material offers a lens into how British colonial administrators and scholars produced knowledge about colonial subjects and for whom. The characterization of Malay peoples broadly as “warlike,” “cowardly,” and “hardly faithful” served a purpose. Far from dead material, these letters reinforced the supremacist nature of subjugation over Britain’s colonies. They kept alive an exaggerated image of the untrustworthy Malay pirate against the backdrop of pristine

¹⁵⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain : Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

natural beauty and foddered the imperial self-proclaimed imperative to explore and preserve faraway lands due to inadequate local stewardship. Colonial administrations thrived on the production of social categories, after all. Demeaning Malay peoples and their cultural expressions was part of a political agenda to portray a vast people as unfit to manage their own land and affairs.¹⁶⁰

This dissertation begins with colonial written material to emphasize the misrepresentations that fill records produced by dominant groups. Working “against the grain,” its aim is to recuperate the voices and agency of subaltern individuals. These British records serve as a launching point for understanding the production of knowledge about Malay peoples and culture and the formation of ideas about Malayness by others from the outside. In this way, the British records are still “active generative substances with histories, [...] with itineraries of their own” in line with Stoler’s methodology,¹⁶¹ but it is more so their silences and misrepresentations that help to situate social and cultural assumptions that surround ethnicity, stereotypes that would later influence the production of heritage narratives by local actors themselves.

Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that knowledge serves as the foundation of power, and therefore it is essential to study silences (and silencing) as part of the production of knowledge about peoples, events, and cultures by dominant groups.¹⁶² Historical narratives are a form of knowledge production; these narratives take shape between what is stated and what is omitted.¹⁶³ Between what is said and unsaid in the words left behind by Staunton, Heyne, Miquel,

¹⁶⁰ See: Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

¹⁶¹ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 1.

¹⁶² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995).

¹⁶³ For powerful studies on the strategy of race/class silencing, see: Rachmi Diyah Larasati, *Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Postgenocide Indonesia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013);

Ridley, Swettenham, and others, we can visualize what the term “Malay” came to signify for those reading and for those producing new material about Southeast Asia. The ambiguous colonial construction of “Malay,” based on racial grouping and categorization that was the pillar of colonial scholarship, has been vigorously challenged by scholars in recent decades. The works of Leonard Andaya, Anthony Milner, Hendrik Maier, and Adrian Vickers represent a significant shift in our thinking about Malayness to move away from the monolithic identity produced by colonial scholarship and towards an understanding of fluidity.¹⁶⁴ Malay peoples and the regions they inhabit – historically and present-day – stretch across a vast waterscape. It is an impossible, and unpractical, exercise to define Malay (*Melayu*, in Malay and Indonesian language), as it is the traits of fluidity that connect the peoples across Asia who identify with the term.

A part of the difficulty in defining Malay or Melayu is that the term is entangled in the history of colonial knowledge production. The imperial drive to produce information about the landscapes and traditions of subjugated peoples contributed to the broad usage of the term Malay to describe the diverse communities living across the Malay peninsula and archipelago. Such descriptions hold lasting impressions. As discussed in this chapter, Staunton and Heyne’s writings from the late 18th and early 19th centuries consistently prioritized the natural landscape over the lives of its inhabitants, producing the idea that locals are undesirables who do not adequately appreciate their surroundings; therefore, the role of the colonizer is cemented with that of civilizer and preserver of natural culture. Miquel (via Bentham’s 1860 Dutch to English translation) lauded

Ileana M Rodríguez-Silva, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137263223>.

¹⁶⁴ Andaya, “The Search for the ‘Origins’ of Melayu”; Milner, *The Malays: The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific*; Maier, *In the Center of Authority*; Adrian Vickers, “Malay Identity,” in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004); See also the edited volume: Timothy P. Barnard, *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004).

Sumatra's luxuries of the land, while Ridley's voyages between the late 19th and early 20th centuries painted images of danger, aroma, and intrigue associated with Malay peoples and customs. That these materials were collected by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, and that they form part of the institution's archives, is further indication that questions regarding Malayness (lands, peoples, customs) were of interest to British empire and such essentializing descriptions must be understood as part of British colonial knowledge production.

This dissertation is interested in the impact of such produced knowledge on Malay performing arts practices. The words of the British officials, botanists, and scholars discussed in this chapter set the stage for how others understood Malay characteristics and culture, and Malays must confront such stereotyping in the assertion of their own histories. It is critical to acknowledge this impact of imperialism on the performing arts space, as generalizations of race, ethnicity, and religion broadly masked local traditions and obscured identity formations. The assertion that Malays are "not dancers" and that Malay dance is a rarity (in the "Classical" dance sense), coupled with a general dismissal of the region's Islamic roots, rendered the Malay Muslim performer-dancer invisible. Through a closer look at British colonial botanists and naturalists who proclaim to represent Malay peoples and landscapes, we may better understand the historical context that entangles the Malay arts with the colonial production of knowledge. These materials produced an image of Malayness that Malay Muslim artists must actively work against as they attribute local significance to Malay cultural expressions in line with regional Malay values. Efforts to move beyond the flattening narratives produced by colonial scholarship opens numerous possibilities for Malay Muslim artists to reclaim space in the archives and on the stage.

VI. CONCLUSION

In late summer of 1929, the *Kent & Sussex Courier* published a review of the film *Show Life* that was screened during that week of publication at the local Kosmos Kinema theater, or “Kozzy” as it was affectionately known.¹⁶⁵ Starring in this film is Anna May Wong, internationally acclaimed actress and Hollywood’s first Chinese American star. In this “gripping melodrama,” Wong takes on the character of Song, “the poor Malay dancing girl” who becomes the “devoted slave” of a white man after he defends her against assault. *Show Life* also showcases another dancer in the character of Gloria Lee, played by German actress Mary Kid, described as a “callous dancer” who cares nothing for this white male savior. Just a few years later, American actress Dorothy Burgess starred in *Out of Singapore* (1932) as Concha, whom the *Nottingham Evening Post* described as “a beautiful half-caste Malay dancer.”¹⁶⁶ The *Kent & Sussex Courier* and the *Nottingham Evening Post*’s reviews typify popular images of Asian dancers outside of Asia. For those in the Global North metropole, the figures of Song, Gloria Lee, and Concha embody that of the “half-caste” and that of the “callous” Asian woman. Characteristics such as these were not unique; similar descriptions dot the landscape of early 20th century European film and theater.

The images conjured in the reviews of *Show Life* and *Out of Singapore* were not produced in a vacuum. Rather, they were in direct conversation with images based on racial stereotyping and colonial Othering that were woven into the theatricalism of Europe’s Belle Epoque. The figure of the Malay dancing girl was a product of European imagination of Asia, a process of misrepresentation that fetishizes sensuality and timidity simultaneously and that emerged through the rhetoric and aesthetics chosen by white individuals in positions of influence and authority. White female bodies and their adopted stage performance of race and ethnicity (infamously

¹⁶⁵ “Kosmos Kinema,” *Kent & Sussex Courier*, August 16, 1929. This silent drama was a German production released under the title *Schmutziges Geld* (lit. Dirty Money). In English speaking theaters, the film was released as *Song* or *Show Life*.

¹⁶⁶ “Theatre & Cinema,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, May 16, 1933.

showcased by the persona of Mata Hari, who opens this chapter) enabled the mixture of generalized and exoticized identities, a process through which the term “Malay” became disassociated from those whose homeland, language, and culture contribute to distinct Malay identities. Instead, if we continue to view Mata Hari as a reflection of these tendencies, her “sinuous movements,” “scantiest of drapery,” and “weird beauty” (characteristics that made the individual performer so popular as to “draw all Paris” to her performances) interrupts any potential for clarity and localized understanding about Malayness.¹⁶⁷

Noting the effect such performances had on perceptions of Malay Otherness, it is important to carefully consider the words of Staunton, Heyne, and Ridley, among others in this chapter. The British colonial project in Southeast Asia relied heavily upon the production of new scholarship on and about the colonies. Staunton, Heyne, and Ridley were three British men who dedicated their careers in service of the Crown and Britain’s empire in the Malay world from the late 1700s through early 1900s. Their assessments of Malay peoples, cultures, and traditions – as violent, untrustworthy, manipulative, inferior Muslims who are not dancers or musicians in a “Classical” sense – were published as books and presented to the royal academic societies for public consumption. They very likely influenced broader perceptions of Malay characteristics amongst their readers. The disparaging representation of Malay peoples and customs in colonial travel accounts and botanical scholarship created space for the cultural misidentifications that could be taken up by popular white performers and film directors, encouraging the obscurity of Malayness behind white cultural privilege and the politics of empire. Malay artists, previously marked as undesirable, are left with the burden of redressing these assumptions about their livelihoods and

¹⁶⁷ “Dancer-Spy’s End. Refused to Have Her Eyes Bandaged. Mata-Hari’s Career. Dramatic Life-Story of Cabaret Favourite.,” *The Liverpool Echo*, October 16, 1917; “Condemned Spies. Dutch Dancer’s Fate.,” *The Scotsman*, October 1, 1917.

traditions.

This chapter has explored the persistent use of the term “Malay” to describe a variety of behaviors that collectively contributed to the production of Malayness as a monolithic, geographically ambiguous group identity. This term is intertwined with its colonial appropriation, misrepresentation, and political reinterpretation that remain complex today.¹⁶⁸ In recent decades, however, significant work has been done to reexamine the construct of Malay in order to understand its historical evolution and continued cultural significance in the world. Instead of being understood as a monolithic term of religion or ethnicity (with clear “primordial” values and a geographically located “center” along the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra), Malay (Melayu, more specifically) is now increasingly understood as a more diverse and inclusive construct that transcends present-day international borders and assumptions of universal conformity.¹⁶⁹

The visual and performing arts have played a critical role in expanding the possible definitions of Malayness. The following chapter explores *Gema Islam*, the magazine mouthpiece of the Indonesian Islamic arts organization *Himpunan Seni Budaja Islam*, to understand the concerns and priorities that existed for Malay Islamic artists in the 1960s. This moment in Indonesia’s history is important as a nation newly liberated from colonialism and at the crossroads of leadership between Soekarno, Indonesia’s national hero, and Suharto, the authoritarian ruler who seized power by way of mass slaughter, prison, and military dictatorship.¹⁷⁰ The manifestation

¹⁶⁸ In Malaysia, for example, Malay takes on a political meaning and thus has legal consequences.

¹⁶⁹ The decision to utilize the term *Melayu* or *Malay* in this dissertation is a challenging one. *Melayu* provides an opportunity to lift some of the obscurity and political tensions that exist as a result of colonial imperial projects in Southeast Asia. In this project, however, I employ the term *Malay*, despite its colonial entanglements (and perhaps at times because of this), as it is an important reminder that the term has a complicated past that threads between colonial encounters. *Malay* is also more widely used in English-language scholarship.

¹⁷⁰ The violence that brought in Suharto’s New Order is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. See: Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (Princeton: University Press, 2018); John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’Etat in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, eds., *Tahun Yang Tak*

of Indonesian Islamic identity during this important period has continued to influence Malay Muslim arts practitioners throughout Indonesia today. The final two chapters approach two such arts practices in Sumatra, *salawat dulang* and *zapin*, that have grown from this 1960s shift in the arts and that each follow distinct Islamic pathways (via Sufi teachings or encounters with traders from the Arab world). Chapter One sets the groundwork for how “Malay” has been employed historically in one archive of British colonial administrators and botanists, and how imperialism worked to produce generalized knowledge about race, ethnicity, and religion. Subsequent chapters will demonstrate how Malay Muslim artists engage their practice to rectify past images produced by others and assert their identities themselves.

Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65: Esai-esai Sejarah Lisan, Cet. 1. (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat ELSAM bekerja sama dengan Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan dan Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia, 2004).

CHAPTER TWO

SEJALAN (PARALLEL PATHS): GOVERNING ISLAM AND THE ARTS IN 1960S INDONESIA

I. INTRODUCTION

Sudah Demikian Berani – To Be This Audacious

Saya sangat tertarik atas pementasan sandiwara yang diselenggarakan oleh Theater Pena Jakarta pada hari Selasa tg. 12/7 '77/malam. Yang sangat saya sayangkan, diantara adegan2 yang sangat berguna bagi perkembangan kemajuan keagamaan, ada adegan yang menurut penilaian saya sangat bertentangan dengan ajaran Islam.¹⁷¹

I'm very interested in the theatrical performance staged by the Pena Theater Jakarta on Tuesday night, July 12, 1977. Regrettably, among the scenes in service of religious progress, there was a scene that I think was contrary to Islamic teachings.¹⁷²

It was mid-July in Jakarta in 1977 when Suharto wrote these words, his cursive penned with a harsh slant using thin black ink. One can only imagine the reaction drawn from its intended recipient, the leadership of the Jakarta-based Pena Theater, upon reading this critical review. This was no ordinary reviewer. Suharto, Indonesia's second president, was over a decade into his 31-year military dictatorship in 1977 and his stance towards the performing arts was one of great suspicion. He associated many music, dance, and theater traditions with socialist ways of life, and Suharto actively manipulated public perception to incite widespread anti-communist sentiment that resulted in mass violence and slaughter across Java, Bali, and parts of Sumatra in 1965-66. Fueled by the military and by state propaganda, Suharto brought in his "New Order" – a break from his predecessor Sukarno – which targeted Leftist organizations and their presumed associates. This included many artists. Dancers, thespians, *dalang*, and others were killed, "disappeared," or if they were young and "clean" (i.e., from a family unsuspected of communist tendencies), they were obliged to relearn performance traditions through state-sponsored programs to standardize

¹⁷¹ "Surat Dari Suharto Kepada Pemimpin Theater Pena Di Jakarta," July 15, 1977, Inventaris Arsip Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, Yogyakarta, 1922-2001, Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia.

¹⁷² My sincerest gratitude to Ika Hutami for her translation assistance on archival materials used in this chapter.

the arts.¹⁷³ The policing of the arts under Suharto's New Order forced artists to make individual choices for survival, for themselves and for their art forms.

In his letter, Suharto expresses his disappointment after watching one scene in particular:

Yaitu adegan yang2an yang ditunjukkan [ditonjolkan] oleh pemeran utama pemuda dan pemudi sebelum kedua insan itu melangsungkan pernikahan, yang konon pemuda itu dalam cerita diterangkan keluaran pondok pesantren, sedang pemudinya bersekolah di IAIN Jakarta, dan pemuda itu sangat baik bacaan Al Qur'annya.

It was the love scene performed by the young lead characters before they get married, in which the young man was an Islamic boarding school graduate, while the young woman is studying at the Islamic University Jakarta, and furthermore the young man is very good at reading the Qur'an.

In this performance, Pena Theater displayed a romantic love scene between two unmarried youths, the boy a talented Quranic reciter (*qari*) and graduate of a local Islamic school and the girl a student at the Islamic college in Jakarta. Suharto asks:

Apakah tingkah laku dua pemuda pemudi pemeran utama itu dimaksudkan sebagai contoh untuk dapat ditiru oleh pemuda-pemudi Islam jaman sekarang?

Was the behavior of the two main characters meant as an example to be emulated by young Muslims today?

He then offers a cutting review:

*Kalau sandiwara yang diselenggarakan oleh Theater Pena **sudah demikian berani**, maka tidak aneh kalau film Indonesia sekarang ini sudah demikian cabul dan pornonya. Akibat dari itu, generasi mendatanglah yang akan mengalami kehancurannya [emphasis added].*

If a play staged by Pena Theater can be **this audacious**, then no wonder Indonesian films these days are very obscene and pornographic. As a consequence, future generations will face ruination [emphasis added].

Suharto concludes his letter by writing that his intentions are to provide constructive criticism for future performances: “*Surat ini saya buat sebagai kritik membangun untuk masa selanjutnya dan terserah adanya.*” Pena Theater may do with this commentary as they please. But it cannot go without consideration that such a letter directly from Suharto would be troubling, perhaps even threatening. In the 1970s, Suharto's focus was directed at the public performance of Muslim piety and behavior. His establishment of *Majelis Ulama Islam* (MUI) in 1975 speaks to his increasing

¹⁷³ Larasati, *Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Postgenocide Indonesia*.

efforts to control and govern Islam and Islamic behavior in the public sphere.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, Suharto sent a copy of his letter to Muhammadiyah's Central Board in Yogyakarta with the note: "*Untuk meningkatkan kewaspadaan, selanjutnya meningkatkan amar makruf nahi mungkarnya dalam segala bidang*" [To raise awareness and to increase the notion of enjoining right and forbidding evil in all fields]. On the one hand a demonstration of piety, Suharto's decision to personally handwrite and forward his letter to the leadership of one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations signals his omnipresence in the arena of cultural surveillance under the New Order. Suharto's criticism of Pena Theater brings to question the permissibility of the arts in Islam, and who claims authority to determine what is allowed and what is forbidden. What ideas might artists like those at Pena Theater bring to bear on their arts practice, and how might they situate themselves as Muslim artists in Indonesia? What constitutes Indonesian Muslim art, identity, and the performance of piety?

To consider such questions, this chapter takes a step back to the decade preceding Suharto's glaring critique of Pena Theater. In 1961, the Islamic cultural organization *Himpunan Seni Budaja Islam* (HSBI) issued a decision that provided a rubric for understanding Indonesian Islamic arts as well as the permissibility of arts practices as they relate to Muslim identity and conduct. This organization and its 1961 *fatwa* were both the first of their kind in Indonesia's cultural history and set an example for other cultural organizations that formed in its wake. To observe HSBI's voice of Islamic authority, this chapter highlights the organization's mouthpiece magazine *Gema Islam* (Islam's Echo), which was in circulation for roughly five years between 1962-1967 with an annual print run exceeding 30,000 from its second year onward. Centering *Gema Islam* elevates a

¹⁷⁴ MUI's first general chairperson was Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Hamka) between 1975-1981, whose activities are discussed later in this chapter. See Moch. Nur Ichwan, "'Ulamā', State and Politics: Majelis Ulama Indonesia after Suharto," *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2005): 45–72.

prominent voice in the Indonesian Islamic arts community at a critical moment in the nation's history just prior to the 1965 regime change.

The events of 1965-66 in Indonesia were spurred by anti-communist suspicion and propaganda that led to mass murder, a horrific period in Indonesia's history that endangered the lives of anyone who might be suspected of nonconformity. Artists were among those severely affected by the massacres. At a time of heightened fear and censorship, Islam became a refuge for some artists to continue their creative practice while avoiding the crackdown from the State and the suspicion of their neighbors.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, Islam became a banner under which some Indonesians in fact justified the policing of other art forms, mobilizing some groups to endorse the events of this era. In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which the production and performance of Islamic piety through *dakwah* art forms influence the conceptualization of Islamic history and identity in Indonesia. It is essential for this project to situate the sociocultural and political landscape of the 1960s, as the patterns of behavior and practice that began within a context of survival shaped the ways in which the Islamic arts are taught and performed today.¹⁷⁶ The legacy of the 1960s is still felt in the livelihoods of many Islamic artists – particularly those artists whom we encounter in chapters three and four. This chapter begins by placing HSBI and its *fatwa* in the context of the shifting cultural tides of 1950s and 1960s Indonesia and ends with a broader discussion of how Islamic art is defined and understood, with particular attention to *dakwah* as arts practice.

¹⁷⁵ In his biography and analysis of Acehese painter A.D. Pirous, Kenneth George discusses the possibilities of Islam as a safe lens of social critique under the New Order. See: George, *Picturing Islam*.

¹⁷⁶ The Indonesian national arts academies were founded in 1965, in many cases expanding preexisting local arts schools. Established as Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI), the name and status of these institutions changed in the 1990s based on governmental decree to become Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI), and again in recent decades to become Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI).

Background – The Materials

The National Library of Indonesia (*Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia*, or Perpustakaan) is Indonesia's repository for the humanities. While the library's extensive reference section on Indonesian history and culture is enough to encourage anyone to brave the commute into Central Jakarta's congested Merdeka Square, my visit to Perpustakaan was in search of one collection that had thus far eluded me, *Gema Islam*. Entering the lobby of the library's new 27-story building, inaugurated in 2017 just two years prior to my fieldwork, my shoes squeak on the brightly polished tile floors as I pass the looming metal columns that bound the library's grand four-story high bookcase – students, families with children, and the elderly alike pause to sit on the lobby's benches throughout the day, their gaze directed upward to admire this looming bookcase. I wait on the unhurried elevators to arrive at the 7th floor canteen, and I pause to take a deep breath in appreciation of the morning quiet. The surrounding smells of Indonesian black coffee and warm *onde-onde* – starchy, lightly sweet sesame balls – are a comfort as I prepare for a day in the window-less newspaper reading room.

Prior to my arrival in Indonesia, the issues of *Gema Islam* that I had located were held at the British Library in London – yet their collection is incomplete, beginning with December 1962 (12 months after the magazine's start) and continuing through December 1964, with large gaps over the course of 1965. The publication's inaugural issue, in which I anticipated to find HSBI's *fatwa* that catalyzed the beginnings of the magazine itself, was missing. Several months later and on opposite time zones, I found myself in Jakarta on an archival sojourn from my ethnographic and oral history research in Sumatra. I could finally revisit my search for *Gema Islam*'s early issues.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ I first encountered *Gema Islam* while researching a paper about Islamic law with Clark Lombardi during my PhD coursework. I am grateful to Choitun Chisaan's work on HSBI and LESBUMI which first introduced me to the

Resisting the urge for a second coffee at the canteen, I make my way back to the elevators and begin the slow climb up to the 20th floor. Beads of sweat form on the bridge of my nose, and my glasses threaten to fog as I fan myself in the stuffy elevator chamber. Finally, a rush of cold air consumes me as I step out onto the *majallah* (old and new newspapers and journals) reading room. With no windows, it is easy to lose track of time in this room. After placing my request, the clerk hands me four volumes of *Gema Islam*, each bounded with black tape. Flipping through one volume holding the first collection of issues, I see a flash of colors: orange, yellow, pink, blue, green, purple, red, maroon. On the cover of each issue, the name *Gema Islam* is printed in large white block letters against a solid color background, the pigment still vibrant despite fading with age. At the beginning of the volume, with a red banner title and a striking photograph of a white domed mosque, is *Gema Islam*'s first issue, published mid-January 1962. My excitement begins to bubble as I thumb through its pages. Skimming article titles, I note several that mention *musjawarah* (deliberation) and *Musjawarah Besar Seniman dan Kebudajaan Islam*, the latter being the title of HSBI's 1961 conference that produced its *fatwa*. These were the articles I had been searching for since my PhD coursework led me to questions of Islam and permissibility. I glance around at the table in front of me, where I had set aside bounded volumes of other *madjallah* from the revolutionary and early postcolonial eras that I had referenced. Why am I drawn to this *madjallah*? What makes *Gema Islam* stand out amongst the numerous historical journals and magazines housed at Indonesia's National Library?

existence of this *fatwa*, as well as to Jennifer Lindsay for her email correspondence in 2018 and for encouraging me to locate the full *Gema Islam* collection in my search for more information. See: Choiratun Chisaan, "In Search of an Indonesian Islamic Cultural Identity, 1956-1965," in *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 283–314.

Prior to Indonesian independence, the Dutch colonial government exercised control over local access to information in the Dutch East Indies via their colonial press, Balai Poestaka.¹⁷⁸ As an independent Republic of Indonesia formed in 1945 (recognized by the Dutch and international community only in 1949 after almost five years of Revolution), many Indonesians rejected Balai Poestaka's connection to the past colonial administration and desired avenues for cultural contribution uninfluenced by government actors. During this time, independent art and culture magazines surged, each in their own way dedicated to postcolonial Indonesian identity formation.¹⁷⁹ The revolutionary period after 1945 witnessed the emergence of independent publications like *Bintang Merah*, *Pembangoenan*, *Mimbar Indonesia*, *Siasat*, and *Mutiara*. The 1950s and early 1960s saw *Budaya*, *Konfrontasi*, *Zaman Baru*, *Pandji Masjarakat*, and *Gema Islam*, among others. While the nationalized Balai Pustaka¹⁸⁰ continued to operate, it was no longer the dominant publishing house influencing Indonesia's cultural landscape.

These early decades of independent nationhood were an important period for Indonesia's Islamic cultural consciousness. Amidst the quickly intensifying political climate of the 1950s and 1960s at the onset of a global Cold War, new formations of Indonesian Islamic identity emerged. One of the leading actors in Indonesia's rise in Islamic cultural consciousness was Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (1908-1981), better known by his penname Hamka. Hamka was the

¹⁷⁸ Established in 1908 under the name Commissie voor de Volkslectuur, the Dutch colonial administration formalized the commission in 1917 as Balai Poestaka. Both Commissie voor de Volkslectuur (Balai Poestaka) and Boedi Oetomo were instrumental in Indonesia's National Awakening for broader access to education. After independence, Balai Poestaka came under the authority of the Republic of Indonesia's government. See: A. Teeuw, "The Impact of Balai Pustaka on Modern Indonesian Literature," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 35, no. 1 (1972): 111–27.

¹⁷⁹ Maya Liem, "A Bridge to the Outside World: Literary Translation in Indonesia, 1950-1965," in *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 163–90.

¹⁸⁰ The spelling of "Pustaka" here reflects changes to the Indonesian alphabet after independence, notably "u" replacing the former "oe" from the Dutch period. Further changes to the Indonesian alphabet were implemented in 1972 to reflect the country's current spelling system, *Ejaan Bahasa Indonesia yang Disempurnakan*.

creative vision behind *Gema Islam*, an Islamic cultural magazine published between 1962-1967 that represented the voice of the Islamic arts organization *Himpunan Seni Budaja Islam* (HSBI). Together with new independent publications, new social and cultural organizations like HSBI emerged during this era. Founded in 1956, HSBI was an independent organization but held close ties to the Indonesian modernist Islamic party *Madjelis Sjura Muslimin Indonesia* (Masjumi), a political party that would eventually be banned under Sukarno in 1960. Later, HSBI aligned itself with Indonesia's Department of Religion (*Departemen Agama*).¹⁸¹ In both positions, HSBI held significant influence over Islamic-based genres of Indonesian arts and participated in ongoing cultural politics during the final years of Sukarno's presidency, called the Guided Democracy era.

The importance of HSBI on the landscape of Indonesian Islamic arts is explicit from the inaugural issue of *Gema Islam* in January 1962. In this issue, several pages are devoted to a large conference led by Hamka just one month prior. At this December 1961 conference, named *Musjawarah Seniman Budajawan Islam* (Deliberation of Islamic Artists and Cultures Figures), an answer to the looming question over the permissibility of arts in Islam emerged in the form of a *fatwa*. It was determined that (some) art is legitimate according to the laws and culture of Islam, a decision that greatly influenced Islamic artists and cultural figures in Indonesia in the years and decades to come. One immediate impact was the formation of other cultural organizations aside from HSBI that maintained direct affiliations with Indonesia's other Islamic political parties.¹⁸² This chapter explores factors that contributed to Indonesian Islamic identity formation at the time

¹⁸¹ Chisaan, "In Search of an Indonesian Islamic Cultural Identity, 1956-1965," 284.

¹⁸² Some examples include Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia (LESBUMI) established by Nahdlatul Ulama, Ikatan Seniman dan Budajawan Muhammadiyah (ISBM) established by Muhammadiyah, Lembaga Kesenian Islam (LEKSI) affiliated with PERTI, and Lembaga Kebudayaan Sjarikat Muslimin Indonesia (LAKSMI) affiliated with PSII. The emergence of multiple cultural organizations connected with Islamic political parties meant that HSBI was no longer alone in their opposition to LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakjat), the cultural organization associated, but not directly affiliated, with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

of this *fatwa* and asks what it meant to be an Indonesian Muslim artist for those who trained as Islamic artists after the turbulent 1960s. Of particular focus is the issue of permissibility within Islamic arts practice and the contents of HSBI's 1961 *fatwa* that contributed to a vibrant Indonesian Muslim lifeworld at a time of political and social upheaval in 1960s Indonesia.¹⁸³ Highlighting *Gema Islam*'s role in this transformative process, this chapter seeks to better understand Islamic legal debates that frame the relationship between the State and the performing arts, setting up the foundation for Islamic performing arts pedagogy in the decades that followed. It was this foundation that supported the growth of the arts practitioners whose stories flow through the next two chapters.

The following section situates the prominent cultural space that *Gema Islam* occupied by turning to Hamka, the famous visionary behind its pages.

II. HAMKA, HIS MOSQUE, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF *GEMA ISLAM*

Born in 1908 in *Ranah Minang*, homeland of the Minangkabau people and modern-day West Sumatra, Hamka filled an important role in Indonesia's Islamic cultural movement in the 20th century, due in part to his family legacy granting him Islamic credibility and his own life's work. His father, known as Haji Rasul after he returned to Minangkabau in 1906 from his studies in Mecca, established the first Modernist journal *al-Munir* ("The Illuminative") in Padang (later Padangpanjang) which operated between 1911-1915. He later founded Sumatera Thawalib in Padangpanjang, which was among the earliest Modernist schools in Indonesia and which was based upon the Minangkabau *surau* traditional education system. Haji Rasul introduced the

¹⁸³ I draw from Kenneth George's work on Acehese painter A.D. Pirous in conceptualizing a Muslim lifeworld. See: Kenneth M. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA, Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Modernist organization Muhammadiyah, founded in Yogyakarta in 1912, to Minangkabau in 1925, after which point Modernism in Indonesia and Muhammadiyah membership grew rapidly.¹⁸⁴

Hamka himself was educated in the Islamic school system in his Minang community, and through his education he was exposed to traditional art forms like *pencak silek* (a form of martial arts) and *randai* (Minang traditional theater), both of which acknowledge roots in local Islamic practice.¹⁸⁵

Hamka moved to Java at a young age and in time he became known and respected for his work in religious, literary, and political spheres.¹⁸⁶

By the 1950s in newly independent Indonesia, Hamka began to travel to the Middle East in his official capacity on the Council for Indonesian Pilgrims to Mecca (*Anggota Majelis Perjalanan Haji Indonesia*) with the Department of Religion. Hamka is often described as a cultural broker between Indonesia and countries of the Middle East, especially Egypt, where he traveled during this time. He was among many who looked towards Egypt's progressive movement as inspiration for a modern Islamic nation.¹⁸⁷ Islamic reform and modernization movements were not new to Indonesia; these concepts formed important parts of the sociocultural archipelagic landscape since the 19th century.¹⁸⁸ Hamka engaged his position as a religious scholar to address

¹⁸⁴ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: C. 1300 to the Present*, 161–63.

¹⁸⁵ In a study of Sundanese culture, Ekadjati discusses sites of religious learning, such as *pesantren*, as simultaneous centers for Islamic cultural activities. This relationship may be extended to the Minang *surau* as a place where Islamic music and culture are rooted. See: Edi S. Ekadjati, *Masyarakat Sunda Dan Kebudayaan* (Jakarta: Girisukti Pasaka, 1984).

¹⁸⁶ Hamka was a prolific writer. Among his other works, he is well-known for his Qur'anic commentary *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, much of which was written when he was arrested and detained for years under Sukarno. He was affiliated with Muhammadiyah and Masyumi political parties. He was the first Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) when it was established in 1975. In 2011, Hamka was recognized posthumously as a National Hero of the Republic of Indonesia.

¹⁸⁷ Hairus Salim discusses the intimate relationship between Egypt and Indonesia during the revolutionary period, notably the role of Indonesian student networks in Cairo. The efforts of Indonesian student activists in Cairo encouraged Egypt to become the first nation to recognize Indonesian independence, an action which in turn encouraged other Arab countries to promptly recognize Indonesia. See: Hairus Salim, "Indonesian Muslims and Cultural Networks," in *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–118.

¹⁸⁸ Hadler, *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism*.

the concerns he had about Indonesian society as a young republic. To do so, he turned to the mosque setting. By the end of the 1950s, Hamka had moved to the suburban Kebayoran Baru neighborhood of Jakarta with the intention of establishing a mosque and school under a mandate from Masjumi's Muslim School Foundation (*Yayasan Pesantren Islam*).¹⁸⁹ Completed in 1958, Masjid Agung Al-Azhar would become a popular gathering place for those committed to Islamic revival in Indonesia. With an already well-known Hamka as its chief imam (*imam besar*), the mosque attracted large crowds.¹⁹⁰

The Al-Azhar mosque would become Hamka's site of *dakwah*, his efforts to propagate the Islamic faith. It was at the Al-Azhar mosque where he started *Pandji Masjarakat* in 1959, an Islamic cultural magazine distributing writings by Muslim authors from across the Muslim world (and especially Egypt). Hamka's intention behind this magazine was to take a stand in "the struggle of modern Islam against the dangerous assaults of materialism and atheism."¹⁹¹ It was through his magazine publications that Hamka presented his critique of Indonesian society: that Muslim culture is too heavily linked with a foreign Arab culture and that more care ought to be given to how Muslim culture has shaped Indonesian culture for centuries, placing Muslimness at the core of national identity. *Pandji Masjarakat*, which translates to Society's Banner, was Hamka's answer to this problem. It was his means of waving the banner of Islam in consolidating Indonesian Islamic identity as national identity.

¹⁸⁹ Additional support for the mosque came from the Ministry of Religion in the form of initial funding, as well as the mayor of Jakarta who donated four hectares of land in Kebayoran Baru for development. For more, see: James R. Rush, *Hamka's Great Story: A Master Writer's Vision of Islam for Modern Indonesia*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 126.

¹⁹⁰ Until the construction of Masjid Istiqlal in 1978, Masjid Agung Al-Azhar was Jakarta's largest mosque.

¹⁹¹ "Sebab Panji Masyarakat diterbitkan," *Panji Masyarakat*, June 15, 1959, as quoted in James R. Rush, *Hamka's Great Story: A Master Writer's Vision of Islam for Modern Indonesia*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 128.

Hamka's critical position was developed in response to what he believed was one of Islam's bitter foes in Indonesian society, that of rising communism.¹⁹² The political landscape of the 1950s and 1960s in Indonesia was unsteady. Sukarno implemented his Guided Democracy system in 1959 as he attempted to balance competing power bases. In doing so, he proposed an ideological formulation under the moniker Nasakom, a threefold concept that called for a union of nationalism (*nasionalisme*), religion (*agama*), and communism (*komunisme*), engaging the powers of these three elements to counter threats of neo-colonialism from the West. Yet what presented itself as Sukarno's largest dilemma in his final years in office was the question of satisfying these dependent, yet competing, alliances without them destroying one another.¹⁹³ Hamka was openly critical of Nasakom, lamenting that in proposing a threefold cooperative strategy Sukarno was effectively blurring the lines between nationalism, Islam, and communism. Hamka viewed Islam and communism in strong opposition to one another.¹⁹⁴ While some Islamic groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama were receptive to adaptation, other community members like Hamka sought to protest and make more space for modernist Islamic groups in guiding the direction of Indonesia.

¹⁹² Indonesia's communist party, *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI), dates back to the early 20th century and by the 1950s was among the largest communist parties around the world. Its popularity was evident in its 4th place position during the 1955 national elections, and by 1965 it had an estimated 3.5 million members. Affiliated mass organizations accounted for an additional 20 million people by 1965. It was one of the strongest political parties in Indonesia at the time, with fierce opposition from the Indonesian Army and both secular and religious political parties. See: Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66*, Human Rights and Crimes against Humanity. (Princeton: University Press, 2018), 9.

¹⁹³ Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia*, Politics and International Relations of Southeast Asia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁹⁴ In his dissertation, Lin Hongxuan challenges the assumed opposition between Islam and Marxism, expanding on their coexistence and mutual affinities in the years leading up to Sukarno's Guided Democracy. M.C. Ricklefs explains that Islamic Communism was most often led by Sufi teachers and others representing traditional forms of Islam. Modernist leaders, those who followed strict scriptural orthodoxy, were Islamic Communism's biggest opponent. See: Hongxuan Lin, "Ummah Yet Proletariat: Islam and Marxism in the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesia, 1915 - 1959" (Seattle, University of Washington Libraries, 2020); Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: C. 1300 to the Present*, 166.

During the Guided Democracy era, the effects of Sukarno's heightened authoritarianism were felt across the political landscape, amplified by global tensions during the Cold War. Sukarno grew suspicious of political manipulation from the West seeking to undermine his authority, and his Guided Democracy was a time of increasing government repression against entities who sought to challenge him. Historian of Indonesia Geoffrey Robinson reveals the reality of the threats that Sukarno perceived, explaining that at least as early as 1955 the United States supplied covert funding, advice, and other assistance to Indonesia's anticommunist parties, namely Masjumi and PSI, in the hope of influencing the 1955 election results.¹⁹⁵ The success of the PKI (Communist Party, *Partai Komunis Indonesia*) and PNI (National Party, *Partai Nasional Indonesia*) in 1955, and their continued success in the late 1950s, alarmed the U.S. Eisenhower administration enough to launch both covert and overt efforts to undermine Sukarno and the growing communist party. U.S. financial and military support continued in earnest directly to Masjumi, PSI (Socialist Party, *Partai Sosialis Indonesia*), and the Indonesian Army, escalating with the 1958 PRRI and Permesta rebellions in Sumatra and Sulawesi, both of which were seen by Washington as opportunities to weaken Sukarno and bolster anticommunist groups, stalling "a feared Communist takeover."¹⁹⁶ When an American B-26 aircraft, piloted by Allen Pope, was shot down in May 1958 over Ambon, Sukarno's suspicions of CIA operations were confirmed and his political crackdown intensified.

Masjumi, the Islamic party with which Hamka was affiliated, was banned in 1960 along with the PSI. Later that year, Sukarno banned Hamka's *Pandji Masjarakat* after it published Mohammad Hatta's *Demokrasi Kita*, in which Sukarno's former vice president openly criticized Guided Democracy. *Pandji Masjarakat* only published 32 issues before this ban – in the early

¹⁹⁵ Robinson, *The Killing Season*, 2018, 93.

¹⁹⁶ Robinson, 94.

Guided Democracy years, at least 38 printed media sources were banned in 1959, followed by 34 others in 1960, and 14 in 1961.¹⁹⁷ It was amid this tense political climate that members of the modernist Islamic community turned to the Al-Azhar mosque as a meeting place for their cause, framed as it was along anti-communist lines.

Hamka took to activating his community by using the mosque and its campus to hold artistic events, exhibitions, and performances, most of which were organized by the Islamic arts organization *Himpunan Seni Budaja Islam*. In fact, HSBI led pioneering efforts to popularize theater as a forum for proselytization, and these efforts were very successful (see figure 2.1). Two of Hamka's regulars at the mosque were Brigadier General Sudirman and Lieutenant Colonel Muchlas Rowi, both high ranking members of the Indonesian army.¹⁹⁸ Together, they persuaded Hamka to establish an Islamic library foundation at the mosque; *Yayasan Perpustakaan Islam* first opened in February 1961 with prominent political and military figures at the helm, including Abdul Haris Nasution (then minister of defense and commander of the Indonesian armed forces) and Ruslan Abdulgani (leader of the PNI, the Indonesian National Party). Through *Yayasan Perpustakaan Islam*, Hamka launched a new Islamic cultural magazine, *Gema Islam*, to operate in a similar spirit to *Pandji Masjarakat* yet with newfound backing from such individuals of political and military influence. And from its inaugural issue, the influence that the military and the government held on this publication was evident.

¹⁹⁷ Akmal Akmal, "State Repression Towards the Press in the Guided Democracy Era: The Case of Pandji Masjarakat and Gema Islam (1959-1966)," in *Proceedings of the International University Symposium on Humanities and Arts 2020*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (Humanities in the Time of Crisis, Jakarta (Virtual): Atlantis Press, 2021), 1.

¹⁹⁸ Rush, *Hamka's Great Story*, 133.

The first issue of *Gema Islam* appeared in mid-January 1962, and it continued publication fortnightly until 1967.¹⁹⁹ Its inaugural issue cover featured a photograph of the Al-Azhar mosque, a bright white building with a large onion dome and single minaret, surrounded by scattered trees (see figure 2.2). An old-fashioned red automobile is pictured paused on the wide road in front of the complex. The photo description on the inside front cover reads:

Mesjid Agung “Al-Azhar”, Kebajoran Baru, Djakarta, tempat “Jajasan Perpustakaan Islam Pusat”, Ruangan2 di-tengah2 gambar ini adalah kantor “Gema Islam” kita ini.

[“Al-Azhar” Great Mosque, Kebayoran Baru, Jakarta, home to “Yayasan Perpustakaan Islam.” Our “Gema Islam” office is located here.]

The name “Gema Islam” is printed in large white block letters against an orange-red background, with the “G” highlighted in reverse coloring.

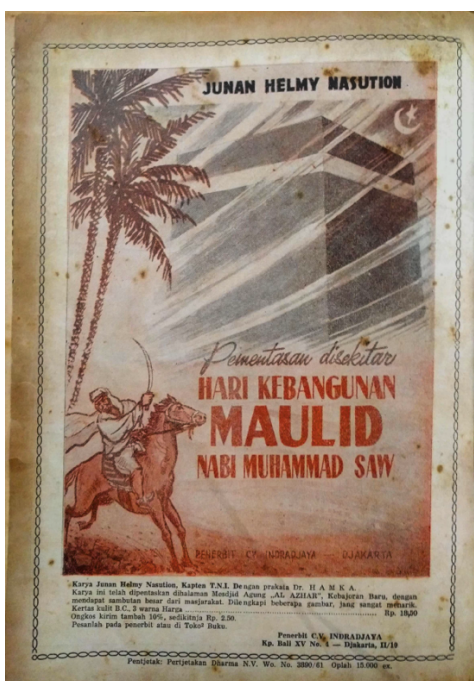


Figure 2.1: An advertisement on the back cover of *Gema Islam* issue 1, highlighting a playscript by Junan Helmy Nasution for sale. HSBI was very active in popularizing theater as mode for proselytization.

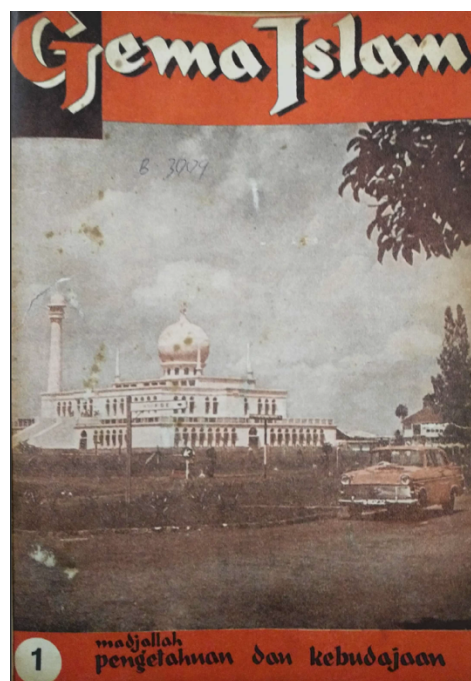


Figure 2.2: Cover of *Gema Islam* issue 1, featuring the Al-Azhar mosque on the cover.

¹⁹⁹ The publication year for *Gema Islam* began on the 15th of January each year. For example, the 1 January 1963 issue is the final issue of year I and the 15 January 1963 issue is the first of year II.

Hamka was the spiritual guide behind *Gema Islam*. Listed as “helper” on the magazine’s editorial board, he published a recurring column recounting his morning lectures at the Al-Azhar mosque called “Tafsir Al-Azhar,” in addition to other articles of religious commentary and poetry. Hamka’s renown attracted a wide readership. While the magazine’s print run for its first year was 10,000, by its second year it exceeded 30,000 and it continued to do so until its close in 1967.²⁰⁰ In addition to Hamka’s regular contributions, many writers from his previous *Pandji Masyarakat* publication also wrote for *Gema Islam*, suggesting a continuity in voice and theme across the two media.

A *Gema Islam* reader of the inaugural issue need only flip to the first page to understand the influence of the military on the magazine’s foundation. The opening words (*Pembuka Kata*) were prepared by Sudirman, Rowi, and Isa Edris, whose names are all followed by their official positions within the Indonesian Army. Immediately following this opening is a full-page greeting from Nasution which includes his photograph in military uniform. Nasution provided the initial funds for *Gema Islam* and was the magazine’s public patron. He was later featured on the cover of *Gema Islam*’s first anniversary issue in January 1963 (see figure 2.3). As army general and army chief of staff (whose prestige extended to him receiving credit for ending the 1958 PRRI rebellion), Nasution provided a seal of approval for the magazine, alluding to an alliance between the military and Muslim cultural authority figures at a time when both groups perceived communism to be the primary threat to their interests.

Gema Islam’s alignment between Muslim groups and the military was an intentional strategy of the magazine’s leadership. Yet these stakeholders also understood the pressures of

²⁰⁰ “Dua Tahun Gema Islam,” *Gema Islam*, January 15, 1964; see also footnote 27 in Hairus Salim, “Indonesian Muslims and Cultural Networks,” in *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–118.

performing loyalty to Sukarno's government at such a politically turbulent time. Such anxieties are clear in the very first issue of *Gema Islam* in which the magazine's leadership expressed support for Sukarno's "liberation" campaign in western New Guinea from the Dutch, a campaign that was supported across Sukarno's Nasakom. One of the magazine's early issues in March 1963 also featured Sukarno on its cover (see figure 2.4). In voicing their support for Sukarno, it was important to suggest to the magazine's readership that Sukarno was in fact relatable as one of them – a good Muslim. To do so, the magazine made efforts to highlight Sukarno's Muslim-ness, including the frequent inclusion of stories that involved his wife Fatmawati whom the wider Muslim community respected due to her family's religiosity. As Sukarno grew into an authoritarian leader and proclaimed himself "president for life" in 1963, such public demonstrations of support for his government became a matter of survival.



Figure 2.3: Nasution, pictured here on the cover of *Gema Islam* issue 24.



Figure 2.4: *Gema Islam* issue 26-27 featured Sukarno wearing Islamic attire.

Yet *Gema Islam*'s spattering of praise for Sukarno was not enough to protect Hamka himself. He was arrested in 1964 under suspicion of conspiring to overthrow Sukarno and placed in a military bungalow in Bogor, not to be released for over two years. His detention coincided

with an eruption of tensions and violence in 1965 leading to an abrupt change in national ideology and leadership. Fueled by the military and by aggressive propaganda, anti-communist fear and anxiety incited mass violence and slaughter across Java, Bali, and Sumatra on September 30th, 1965, a period of violence that continued through 1966. The death toll from this massacre is estimated at anywhere between 500,000 and 1 million Indonesians; without formal acknowledgement of this violence, these events have left lasting and unresolved social and psychological trauma on the nation. Amidst the violence and chaos of this period, Sukarno was removed from power and the official narrative, crafted by state propaganda, blamed communists for an attempted coup.²⁰¹ The military (with backing from the United States), and in particular General Suharto, emerged as victors, and Suharto became the head of state of Indonesia on March 11, 1966 with Sukarno's forced signing of the brief Supersemar document surrendering power to General Suharto.²⁰² He would remain in power for thirty-two years, during which time anxieties over communism and communist affiliation remained high.

The complete elimination of the Indonesian communist party and its members was a victory for the Cold War's capitalist bloc.²⁰³ It also benefited Indonesia's organized Muslims who,

²⁰¹ For thorough engagement with the various stakeholders and influences leading up to 1965 in Indonesia, see: Robinson, *The Killing Season*, 2018; Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*; John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia*, Critical Human Rights (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); For a careful look at the impact of New Order repression on the performing and literary arts, see: Michael Bodden, "Language of Traumas, Bodies, and Myths: Learning to Speak Again in Post-1998 Indonesian Theater," in *Arts, Popular Culture and Social Change in the New Indonesia*, Ed. Michael Leaf (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Institute of Asian Research, Centre for Southeast Asian Research, 2007), 119–51; and the essays included in Keith Foulcher and Tony Day, eds., *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002).

²⁰² Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 274; John H. McGlynn, ed., *Indonesia in the Soeharto Years: Issues, Incidents, and Images* (Jakarta: Lontar, in association with Ridge Book, 2007).

²⁰³ Without acknowledgement or formal apology for the unchecked killing of civilians, 1965-66 remains an unresolved conflict amongst Indonesians today. In his recent article, Dr. Baskara Wardaya argues that because the elimination of the communist party in Indonesia benefitted the capitalist bloc, foreign western governments were not motivated to place pressure on the Indonesian government to acknowledge the mass violence. The Soviet Union and its allies also did not place pressure on Indonesia because it was assumed that Indonesia took the side

for the decades leading up to 1965, viewed communism in opposition to modernist Islam. Taking advantage of this horrific episode, many younger members of Islamic groups participated in the killings, particularly the Ansor youth group of the so-called “traditionalist” Islamic political party and later social organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama.²⁰⁴ While Hamka was still detained, the Al-Azhar mosque was used as an impromptu headquarters for anti-communist youth during the killings, spurred no doubt by endorsements from authority figures like the chair of Muhammadiyah who proclaimed that killing communists was *halal* (permitted).²⁰⁵ *Gema Islam* paused its operations between September 1965 and August 1966, by which time Hamka had been released from detention and he had revived his activities at the mosque. Exactly one year after the violence began in 1965, *Gema Islam* released its 84th issue and inside its pages the magazine’s perspective on the mass killings was clear: the strength of Islam and of faith had defeated the communist atheists. The destruction of the Left through the events of “G30S/PKI,”²⁰⁶ as it was then called, was presented as a continuation of Indonesia’s national revolution.²⁰⁷ This period of violence was thus justified, in the minds of both modernist and traditionalist Muslim groups, as an unfortunate but necessary episode to achieve their goals as a nation.

of Beijing in the Sino-Soviet rivalries of the 1960s. Because it did not benefit the global politics of either side, the crimes against humanity during 1965-66 have remained silenced in Indonesia's national memory. See: Baskara Wardaya, “The Long Shadow of the Cold War: The Cold War Policies of the United States towards Asia and Their Impact on Indonesia,” *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 52, no. 3–4 (2021): 331–47.

²⁰⁴ See: Greg Fealy and Katharine McGregor, “Nahdlatul Ulama and the Killings of 1965-66: Religion, Politics, and Remembrance,” *Indonesia* 89, no. 89 (2010): 37–60; Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, Vic., Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990).

²⁰⁵ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*; For more information about the role of youth gangs and militia in support of Suharto’s New Order, see: Loren Ryter, “Pemuda Pancasila: The Last Loyalist Free Men of Suharto’s Order?,” in *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 124–55; as well as his dissertation: Loren Ryter, “Youth, Gangs, and the State in Indonesia” (University of Washington, 2002).

²⁰⁶ “Gerakan 30S/PKI,” meaning “September 30th Movement/Communist Party of Indonesia.”

²⁰⁷ The following two articles in particular instill this message: Junan Helmy Nasution, “‘Lubang Buaja’ Menjadikan 1 Oktober Hari Kemenangan Tuhan dan Hari Kesaktian Pantjasila,” *Gema Islam*, October 1, 1966; Wangsa Widjaja, “Kalau Mau Masuk Orde Baru Peladjarilah Sedjarah Nasional,” *Gema Islam*, October 1, 1966.

The violent destruction of the Left was possible in part because of the close relationship between the military and the anti-communist Muslim community. The social networks in place at the Al-Azhar mosque exemplify this relationship. While Hamka expressed remorse at the horrific death toll that followed the events of 1965, he was among other Muslim community leaders who utilized these events to justify the righteousness of their cause.²⁰⁸ *Gema Islam* would continue its operations through 1967. While short in lifespan, *Gema Islam* reflects how some Indonesian Muslim cultural figures imagined themselves at a critical turning point in Indonesia's history and how these groups understood their individual cultural and creative contributions for themselves and for the nation.

Gema Islam's lifespan – 1962 to 1967 – straddles a dark period for Indonesians, and the magazine (its editorial board, contributing writers, and readers) danced to a tune of complicity in the violence that erupted. Yet in the magazine's early years, the tone was one of excitement and hope for the peaceful future of Indonesian Islamic arts and culture. In the following section, HSBI's 1961 conference is discussed as the main feature highlighted in *Gema Islam's* inaugural issue released one month later. This conference, and the *fatwa* that resulted from its deliberations, consolidated a set of principles that guided Indonesian Muslim artists in their positioning against the Left and provided legitimized avenues for artistic expression.

III. *ISLAM MEMPERKENANKAN (ISLAM PERMITS): THE 1961 MUSJAWARAH AND FATWA*

Himpunan Seni Budaja Islam (HSBI) was established in 1956 largely as a response from the Muslim community towards the communist party's growing base as of the 1955 Indonesian general elections. The cultural organization LEKRA, while politically unaligned, cultivated a close

²⁰⁸ Rush, *Hamka's Great Story*, 151.

relationship with PKI, and many Muslim anticommunist activists viewed the influence of LEKRA on the general population as deeply threatening to Indonesian national culture. Among these fears included anxiety over PKI's prominent place in Sukarno's government under Nasakom, where it stood alongside Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI). HSBI was formed largely as Indonesian modernist Islam's response to LEKRA, and it became the first Islamic cultural organization to pave the way of positioning Islam in Indonesian cultural life.²⁰⁹

HSBI's focus rested on intentionally Islamic or Islamic inspired genres of the arts, particularly drama but also radio, literature, music, and occasionally dance, in the search for Indonesian cultural identity. Questions of Indonesian Islamic identity, art, and culture during this time were inseparable from political concerns. After HSBI's founding, Islamic cultural organizations emerged across a broad spectrum, many unofficially aligned with various Islamic political parties, yet they were all unified against the growing popularity of the Left. The primary concern of this time was the meaning of art broadly and of artistic practice individually. The belief of "art for art's sake" (*seni untuk seni*) was rejected due to its indulgence of individualism and liberalism; on the other hand, "art for the people" (*seni untuk rakyat*) had become an ideal of the Left and thus many Muslim activists felt excluded from its meaning.²¹⁰ For many Islamic cultural organizations, and for HSBI especially, the purpose of art was first and foremost a means to seek God's truth and express devotion. Art was justifiable when used as a channel for proselytization (*dakwah*). HSBI worked hard to dispel any skepticism around artistic practice by advocating for *dakwah* arts through its community engagement and eventually through its magazine outlet.

²⁰⁹ Other Islamic cultural organizations soon followed in HSBI's footsteps after the 1961 Musjwara, such as Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia (LESBUMI) established by Nahdlatul Ulama in 1962.

²¹⁰ Chisaan, "In Search of an Indonesian Islamic Cultural Identity, 1956-1965," 297.

HSBI understood itself as standing in the crosshairs of competing ideals in Indonesian cultural life. Hinduism, Christianity, the West, and atheism were among the presumed prominent pulls on Indonesian identity formation.²¹¹ To strengthen the position of Islam in these debates, HSBI established *Majelis Seniman Budajawan Islam*, or MASBI (Council of Islamic Artists and Cultural Figures), in early 1961 as an advisory board made up of cultural authorities and esteemed *ulama* irrespective of political affiliation. Led by Hamka himself, MASBI's goal was to address questions related to the arts and Islamic culture in Indonesia. In considering this mission, MASBI called for a large meeting, called *Musjawarah Seniman dan Budajawan Islam* (Grand Deliberation of Islamic Artists and Culture), to mark the conclusion of their first year. Between December 15-17th in 1961, one month before the release of *Gema Islam*'s inaugural issue, approximately 100 Muslim activists, intellectuals, and *ulama* gathered in the ballroom of the State Administrative Agency in Jakarta to commit themselves to collaborative consultation and deliberation, or *musjawarah*, on the role of art within Islam. This conference had significant outcomes on the Indonesian Islamic community. Notably, this conference led to a series of edicts, or *fatawa* (plural: *fatwa*) issued by MASBI concerning artistic activity within Islam that would serve as a reference for any future questions about the Islamic legitimacy of the arts. The impact of this decision was felt by Islamic artists both within and outside HSBI, and it inspired a larger Islamic cultural movement to emerge. Other cultural organizations formed to follow suit, many aligned with the Islamic political parties: *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia* (LESBUMI) was established by Nahdlatul Ulama, *Ikatan Seniman dan Budajawan Muhammadiyah* (ISBM) was established by Muhammadiyah, *Lembaga Kesenian Islam* (LEKSI) was affiliated with PERTI, among others. HSBI maintained its unofficial relationship with Masjumi until it was outlawed in

²¹¹ For more detail on these dynamics, see: Chisaan, 299.

1960. The emergence of numerous Islamic cultural organizations after 1961 meant that HSBI was no longer alone in its opposition to LEKRA – an Indonesian Islamic cultural front was solidified.

As head of MASBI, Hamka delivered the closing address to the *musjawarah* attendees. In this speech, Hamka discussed what he believed to be the most pressing concerns facing Indonesia's Muslim society in his time.²¹² He shared his dismay regarding the influence that Western culture holds on Muslim society:

[...] seluruh Dunia Islam sekarang, sedjak dari Marokko sampai ke Merauke, sedjak dari istana radja2 sampai kegubuk petani, sedjak dari keliling Mesdjidil Haram sendiri, jang orang sehabis mengerdjakan thawaf lebih dahulu megedjar meminum cocacola sebelum meminum air Zamzam, sampai ketenda Badwi dipadang pasir, sampai kerumah saja, sampai kerumah saudara, telah dimasuki oleh bandjir Kebudayaan Barat.

[...] the entire Islamic world, from Morocco to Merauke, from the palaces of kings to the huts of farmers, from the surroundings of the Great Mosque of Mecca itself, where people rush to drink Coca-Cola after performing tawaf before drinking Zam-zam water, to the Bedouin tents in the desert, to my house, to your house, has been **inundated by the flood of Western Culture** [emphasis added].

Relaying his disappointment to the *musjawarah* attendees, he comments on their choice of attire as a reflection of Western influence on the presentation of Indonesian Islamic identity:

Bahkan dalam musjawarah Kebudayaan kita inipun, tidakkah kita rasai pengaruh Kebudayaan Barat. Tahun 1931 saja mulai masuk ke Makassar, djika kaum perempuan keluar rumah, sado jang ditumpangnja masih didinding rapat dengan kain, agar wadjah perempuan itu tidak kelihatan. Dan sebelum itu saja dating ke Langkat ditahun 1927, saja lihat perempuan2 Langkat hanja matanja sadja jang kelihatan djika dia berdjalan didjalan raja. Kalau rapat sematjam ini 25 tahun jang lalu, tentu sudah penuh dengan serban orang Hadji. Kini saja lihat berapa banjaknja hadji, tak seorangpun jang beserban.

[...] **can we not observe the influence of Western culture on this cultural assembly?** During my initial visit to Makassar in 1931, I observed that when women ventured outside their homes, they would cover their *sado* [horse-drawn carriage] with cloth to conceal their faces. In 1927, I visited Langkat and observed that women there covered their entire bodies, leaving only their eyes visible while walking on the roads. If we had held this meeting 25 years ago, this place would have been filled with hajjis wearing turbans. Currently, there are numerous hajjis present, however, **none of them are wearing a turban** [emphasis added].

Despite Hamka's disapproval of the pervasiveness of Western culture on Islamic society, he recognized the futility of rejecting it outright. Instead, Hamka declared, one must "selectively adopt those [aspects of Western culture] that align with our Muslim values and way of life"

²¹² Hamka, "Kebudayaan Islam adalah Mazhar dari Tauhid dan Taqwa," *Gema Islam*, January 15, 1962.

(melainkan kita pilih mana jang sesuai dengan dasar pendirian hidup kita sebagai Muslim).²¹³ It is in this selection process – identifying what is *haram* (forbidden), *makruh* (disapproved), and *mubah* (permissible) within Islamic practice in a globalizing world – that Indonesia’s *ulama* may best come to the aid of the Islamic cultural movement (*Itulah pentingnja Ulama aktif dalam lapangan Kebudayaan*). He summarized the goals of the *musjawarah* event:

Inti keputusan kita, bahwasanja Kebudayaan Islam ialah mazhar dari Tauhid dan Taqwa adalah pegangan kita jang teguh. Inilah hasil gemilang dari pemusjawaratan kita. Sudah terang bahwa Seni dalam pandangan kita bukanlah seni jang membawa sjirk, bukan pembangkit sjahwat dan nafsu sex, dan bukan Seni buat Seni, tetapi Seni buat mentjari hakikat. Hakikat Ketuhanan dan Hakikat Machluk. Kita telah mendapat pegangan buat menghadapi soal2 Kebudayaan dizaman depan.

The foundation of our decision is rooted in the belief that Islamic culture represents the manifestation of *tauhid* (the oneness of God) and *taqwa* [piety, fear of God]. This is the outstanding outcome of our deliberations. It is evident that, in our perspective, art should not promote idolatry or polytheism, nor should it incite lust or sexual desire. Rather, it should serve the purpose of **seeking the essence of divinity and the essence of being**, rather than being created solely for the sake of art itself [emphasis added].

In closing, Hamka makes a hopeful appeal to the legacy of syncretism within Islamic learning, building upon past knowledge systems in defining an Indonesian Islamic identity for the future:

Dan apabila kita telah mendapat diri kita sendiri, kita tidak takut lagi menghadapi Barat atau Timur dalam hal Kebudayaan. Sebagaimana Ummat Islam dizaman djajanja dengan aktif menjalini perpustakaan Junani, Persia dan Hindi, untuk memperkaja bahan penegakan diri sendiri, dizaman mulai perkembangan Bani ‘Abbas di Baghdad dan dizaman Bani Umajah di Andalus, demikian pula kita akan lakukan ditanah air kita.

Our future holds promise, and by establishing our cultural perspective based on the principles that guide our lives, we can begin to discover our true selves. Once we have discovered our own identity, we become more confident in engaging with both Western and Eastern cultures. Similar to the Muslims during their prime, who extensively utilized Greek, Persian, and Hindi libraries to enhance their knowledge, during the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad and Umayyad dynasty in Andalusia, **we too will follow suit in our own country** [emphasis added].

In these passages, Hamka addresses what he views to be the goals of HSBI’s cultural movement: to reject all art that fosters idolatry, arouses lust, or art that is created purely for the sake of art and nothing more. Instead, HSBI promotes the advancement of an art that seeks essential truth (*hakikat*). *Hakikat*, derived from the Arabic *ḥaqīqa*, connotes the conceptual

²¹³ Hamka, 14.

meaning of mystical truth that is deeply rooted in *tasawwuf* (the Arabic term for Islamic mysticism, also known as Sufism), as one of the four stages of knowledge.²¹⁴ In linking the production of art with the search for, and hopefully the attainment of, mystical truth, Hamka speaks to the potential of art that is created in the spirit of Islam. Art produced in this way – with the intention of seeking Islamic mystical truth – may be understood as forms of *dakwah*.²¹⁵ Derived from the Arabic *da'wa* which means “call” or “invitation,” *dakwah* refers simultaneously to the propagation of the faith (i.e., conversion) and the strengthening of Islamic faith amongst already pious Muslims. Employed as a guide for living by Islamic principles and morality, *dakwah* is often taken up by Islamic movements and organizations as they compete for authority and influence over organizations, leaders, and individual citizens. *Dakwah*, then, flows underneath religious, political, and social life.²¹⁶ It is in this formation that HSBI’s *dakwah* efforts, disseminated via *Gema Islam*, were best mobilized to confront communism and other perceived threats to Islamic political and social power.

HSBI’s *musjawarah* event escapes significant attention from the otherwise rich and extensive scholarship surrounding Indonesian social and cultural change in the 1960s. A closer look at *Gema Islam*’s inaugural issue, in which the *musjawarah* was a prominent feature, is a

²¹⁴ During my fieldwork in West Sumatra and Riau, the word *tasawwuf* was commonly used to discuss Islamic mysticism, as well as the word Sufi. These terms may not be used elsewhere in Indonesia (or elsewhere in Southeast Asia, for that matter). In Java, for example, the term used is *kebatinan*, and Sufi is hardly ever used. The four stations of Islamic learning discussed in this section are *shari’a* (the exoteric path), *tariqa* (the esoteric path), *haqiqa* (mystical truth), and finally *marifa* (final mystical knowledge). See: Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964); Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (England: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd, 1914).

²¹⁵ See the Introduction and Glossary to this dissertation for a fuller discussion of *dakwah*. The significance of *tasawwuf* in *dakwah* arts traditions is explored in detail in Chapter Three through the Minang oral tradition *salawat dulang*.

²¹⁶ Johan Meuleman, “Dakwah, Competition for Authority, and Development,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 167, no. 2–3 (2011): 236–69. In his article, Meuleman mentions the uniquely Indonesian phenomenon of *dakwah pembangunan*, or *dakwah* development, under Suharto’s New Order. This advancement of politicized *dakwah* support influenced a new generation of Indonesian Islamic artists trained in the new national arts academies.

unique opportunity to situate the concerns of some Muslim cultural figures at this time of evolving identity formations. For three days and three nights in mid-December 1961, the *musjawarah* attendees – approximately 100 *ulama*, Islamic scholars, intellectuals, artist, and cultural figures – devoted themselves to questions related to “art and culture in the spirit of Islam” (*seni dan budaja jang berdjiwakan Islam*).²¹⁷ Recognizing that young Muslims involved in the arts and culture sector faced harsh criticism from within the Muslim community, the *musjawarah* held a tangible goal: to develop guidelines and *fatawa* (edicts) through discussion and consensus-building that may be employed by community members to make sense of their creative efforts. Such guidelines would move forward the goal of HSBI community members who believed that “promoting and developing arts and culture rooted in Islamic principles is essential in addressing modern-day obstacles.”²¹⁸

A decision was put together by the *musjawarah*’s drafting committee with the following focus areas, as published in Amura’s article for *Gema Islam*:

- A. Cultural Forms (*Wudjud kebudajaan*)
- B. Islamic Perspective on Culture and Art (*Sikap Islam terhadap kebudajaan/kesenian*)
- C. The Position of Indonesian Islamic Cultural Figures and Artists towards Cultural and Artistic Movements (*Pendirian Budajawan/Seniman Islam Indonesia terhadap gerakan kebudajaan/kesenian*)
- D. Efforts to Promote and Cultivate Culture and Arts (*Daftar usaha memperkembang kebudajaan/kesenian*)

HSBI took care to define “Culture,” and “Islamic Culture” specifically, as the manifestation of the soul, taste/sense, intention, and aspiration innate to all God’s creations (*fitrah*):

Kebudajaan ialah manifestasi dari ruh, zauq, iradah dan amal (tjipta, rasa, karsa dan karya) dalam seluruh segi kehidupan insani sebagai fithrah, tjiptaan karunia Allah.

Kebudajaan Islam ialah manifestasi dari ruh, zauq, iradah dan amal (tjipta, rasa, karsa dan karya) dalam seluruh segi kehidupan insani muslimin jang bersumber atau berunsur adjaran Islam.

²¹⁷ Amura, “Musjawarah Besar Seniman dan Kebudayaan Islam,” *Gema Islam*, January 15, 1962, 25, B:- 3009, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

²¹⁸ Amura, 25.

Culture is a manifestation of the human soul, taste, intention, and aspiration (cipta, rasa, karsa, karya)²¹⁹ in all facets of life, serving as a divine expression of God's grace.

Islamic culture is a manifestation of the soul, taste, intention, and aspiration of Muslims, encompassing every facet of their life and integrating principles of Islamic Teaching.

These four concepts, listed first in transliterated Arabic and followed by Indonesian in parentheses, form the foundation for culture's purpose, that which is in service of and devotion to God. Any development of the cultural arts must be in alignment with furthering God's vision for earth and mankind. Section B expands:

Kebudayaan sebagai pernyataan alam fikiran dan perasaan dari kehidupan manusia, bagi muslimin haruslah menjadi pernyataan tujuan hidupnya jg. ditentukan oleh Allah Chaliqnya [...]. Karena itu, gerakan dan usaha mempertumbuh dan memperkembang kebudayaan dan kesenian haruslah dalam batas2 jang ditentukan Allah, Zat jang memberi arah bagi setiap gerak gerik manusia [...].

Culture is not solely a representation of human thoughts and emotions. **For Muslims, it is also an embodiment of their life's purpose**, which is determined by Allah, the Creator [...]. Therefore, any endeavor to promote and enrich culture and art **should be guided by the boundaries set by Allah**, the One who provides guidance for all human endeavors [emphasis added].

To this end, HSBI contends that the broad purpose of art cannot be "art for art's sake" or "art for the people." Instead, art must be elevated (*diluhurkan*) to be in service of God and in promoting one's spiritual growth:

Dengan demikian, maka tujuan kebudayaan pada umumnja, dan kesenian pada chususnja tidaklah semata2 bertudjuan "seni untuk seni" atua "seni untuk rakjat" tetapi harus diluhurkan mendjadi "seni untuk kebaktian kehadiran Allah" jang dengan sendirinja mentjakup tudjuan memadjukan kesenian jang bermanfaat lahir bathin untuk peri kemanusiaan.

The objectives of culture, including art, extend beyond the notions of "art of art's sake" or "art for the people." Instead, **they should be regarded as "art for the worship of God's presence,"** which aims to promote art that benefits humanity both physically and spiritually [emphasis added].

HSBI's advocacy for the place of art within Islam required a strong statement regarding permissibility – that which is allowed and that which is not allowed – for aspiring Muslim artists

²¹⁹ The original article mentions *ruh* (soul), *zauq* (taste), *iradah* (intention), and *amal* (aspiration) but the Indonesian translation in parenthesis does not directly translate (*cipta* – creative ideas, *rasa* – taste, *karsa* – intention, *karya* – creation).

to follow. Critical to this aim was their inclusion of a section titled “*Hukum Kesenian*” (Legal Framework for Art), under which the *musjawarah* drafting committee proclaimed:

Islam memperkenankan karya segala tjabang kesenian untuk keluhuran budi (achlak) dan untuk taqwa kehadiran Allah dan tidak berunsur a-susila, maksiat, tjabul dan sjirik serta melanggar larangan Allah dan Rasul.

Islam memperkenankan seni pabat untuk perhiasan, permainan, tarbijah dan ta'lim, ketjual seni patung untuk taabbud, maka hukumnja sjirik dan untuk maksiat a-susila dan pengagungan, maka hukumnja haram.

Islam allows for artistic expression in all forms intending to promote nobility and piety towards Allah. However, such expression must not include any elements of immorality, obscenity, or association of God with other deities that would violate the prohibitions set by Allah and the Prophet.

In accordance with Islamic teachings, sculpture is deemed permissible for purposes such as jewelry, games, *tarbiah* (development/training) and *taklim* (education). However, if used for *taabud* (worship), it is considered **syirik (the sin of idolatry or polytheism)**. Furthermore, sculptures that promote immorality or are used for glorification are prohibited [emphasis added].

In these two statements, HSBI declares that art is a legitimate activity according to Islam (*Islam memperkenankan karya segala tjabang kesenian*); artistic activities should be in observance of Islamic morality (*achlak*, Ar. *akhlaq*) and piety (*taqwa kehadiran Allah*), and therefore should avoid actions deemed *haram* (*tidak berunsur a-susila, maksiat, tjabul dan sjirik serta melanggar larangan Allah dan Rasul*); and all art forms are legitimate except sculpture, which remains dangerously close to the sin of idolatry (*sjirik [...], maka hukumnja haram*).

The two statements above, listed under *Hukum Kesenian*, display the strongest language in HSBI’s decision produced as a result of their *musjawarah*. It provides the language to assess art as appropriate or not in determining the level of adherence to *achlak*, conceptualizations of morality in Islamic theology and philosophy. Yet despite this firm stance, these statements are loosely inclusive of a wide range of possible artistic expressions within the visual and performing arts. The open-ended legal framework put forth by this *musjawara* therefore makes space for Muslim artists to negotiate their creative works to be compatible with ideas of Islamic permissibility. As the leader amongst Islamic cultural organizations to formalize language surrounding arts permissibility, HSBI holds an authoritative voice within Indonesian Islamic culture and identity

formation. The publication of this *fatwa*, by nature of HSBI's social and cultural positioning in Indonesia, would certainly have been an influence on Indonesian Muslim artists regardless of affiliation.

In sections C and D that follow *Hukum Kesenian*, HSBI provides specific directives for the preservation of Indonesian Islamic art forms that are integral to regional Islamic culture as well as the development of new Indonesian Islamic arts and culture:

Budajawan dan Seniman Islam Indonesia chususnja, ummat Islam Indonesia umumnja bertekad:

1. **Memelihara dan memperkembang** kebudayaan/kesenian Islam jang telah ada untuk dapat diteruskan sebagai amanat Angkatan jang lalu kepada Angkatan jang akan datang.
2. **Memperkaja** kebudayaan/kesenian Islam dengan karya Tjipta jang baru **jang bernafaskan djiwa dan semangat Islam**.
3. Menjumbangkan se-banyak2nja karya seni/budaja jang bernafaskan Islam kepada pertumbuhan kebudayaan/kesenian guna memperkaja perbendaharaan kebudayaan/kesenian bangsa Indonesia chususnja, perbendaharaan kebudayaan/kesenian dunia umumnja.
4. **Turut mendjaga** pertumbuhan dan perkembangan kebudayaan/kesenian bangsa Indonesia, agar berisikan, atau kemasukan atau disertai oleh unsur2 jang melanggar adab Susila jang telah ditetapkan oleh agama, supaja djangan sampai pertumbuhan dan perkembangan kebudjajaan/kesenian menimbulkan akibat jang negative dan destruktif lahir dan bathin.
5. Mengingatnkan segala usaha dibidang gerakan kebudayaan/kesenian dalam rangka **penjiaran Islam** (da'wah Islamiyah).

Indonesian Islamic artists and cultural figures, along with the broader Muslim community in Indonesia, are committed to [emphasis added]:

1. **Preserving** and **advancing** Islamic culture and art to transmit it as a legacy from previous to future generations.
2. **Enhancing** Islamic culture and art through innovative creations **that embody the essence and values of Islam**.
3. Contribute a multitude of artistic and cultural works that embody Islamic values to the development of culture and art, with the aim of enriching the cultural and artistic heritage of Indonesia and the world.
4. It is important to **actively protect** the growth and development of Indonesian culture and art while ensuring that they do not include elements that violate established ethical norms dictated by religion. This will prevent any negative physical or spiritual consequences that may arise from the growth and development of culture and art.
5. Emphasize the cultural and artistic endeavors within the context of **promoting Islam** (da'wah Islamiyah).

These directives encourage followers to preserve (*memelihara*), advance (*memperkembang*), enhance (*memperkaja*), and actively contribute to and protect (*turut mendjaga*) the Islamic arts (*jang bernafaskan djiwa dan semangat Islam*, lit. "that which breathes the soul and spirit of Islam"). Underlying each of these efforts is the guidance to always remember (*mengingatnkan*) that the arts serve a larger purpose, that of spreading Islam (*da'wah Islamiyah*).

The *musjawarah*'s decision also includes detailed steps to be taken to advance the arts in a modernizing society. The first among these recommended steps is the documentation and registration of Islamic cultural arts *jang berjiwa ke-Tuhanan keagamaan* ("that embodies religious divinity"), both historical forms and those being created contemporaneously to the *musjawarah*. Of particular interest are:

Sjair, sadjak, pantun, gurindam, pepatah, kata2 berhikmah dari pudjangga2, filosof dan tokoh2 Islam dan tokoh2 dunia. Termasuk segala matjam lagu, njanjian dan music, serta kisah sedjarah dan dizaman bahari, tengah dan modern.

[...] poems, rhymes, pantun (a traditional Malay verse form with "abab" rhyme), gurindam (a type of irregular verse form in traditional Malay poetry), proverbs, and words of wisdom from poets, philosophers, as well as Islamic and world leaders. This includes a variety of musical genres such as songs, chants, and instrumental pieces, as well as historical narratives spanning from maritime to medieval and modern times.

This list prioritizes the Islamic oral tradition across Indonesia – verse, song, music, philosophy, among others that represent Muslim cultures from various parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Such emphasis acknowledges the close relationship between Islam and orality, that deep spirituality of sound, and unquestioningly legitimizes indigenous oral traditions that, over time, have served as vessels for Islamic meaning.

HSBI's other recommended steps to advance the arts include intentional research of art and culture that represent Indonesia's Muslim spirit as well as that of global Islam, preservation in the form of instructional books to be taught from elementary school age through higher education, and dissemination (through publications and propaganda) of information to explain what constitutes appropriate art and culture, and especially Islamic culture, so that such issues become mainstream amongst the population. Finally, HSBI's *musjawarah* recommends "*kreasi baru*," or novel creative works, that embody these elements of local Islamic culture and demonstrate for the public the approved creative avenues of Islamic ways of being. These steps suggest a shift in approach towards the documentation and collection of the arts with the goal of gaining recognition as a

registered Indonesian Islamic art form. Muslim artists now have new goals for their established and newly created repertoire, with new benchmarks for success as an artist.

HSBI's *musjawarah* of late 1961 is part of a landscape of emergent social and cultural change in post-1965 Indonesia, when the performance of piety and loyalty to the regime would become increasingly governed activities. Among the many cultural changes of the New Order era was the establishment of the state performing arts colleges, which would become the most reliable employer for performers as "bureaucrats-teachers" with opportunities to teach and to become eligible for government-sponsored performances and travel abroad.²²⁰ As performing artists adjusted to new roles as civil servants, traditions too underwent change to adapt to new demands of audience and sponsorship. The arts colleges became training centers of a sort for large state ceremonies, festivals, and competitions that were a key feature of the New Order, and which continue to be important events on the Indonesian social landscape. The West Sumatra MTQ *tari massal* performance from 2019, discussed in this dissertation's introduction, is a clear illustration of the large-scale performance spectacles that accompany state-sponsored events.

The highly active role of the government under Suharto's New Order speaks to its position of power – the state sought to control both the repertoire of available traditional arts to be performed and the performer's bodies themselves. Dancer and scholar Rahmi Diyah Larasati writes of the violence written onto the body in its "reeducation" at the state arts academies post-1965.²²¹ Pressures were, and continue to be, placed upon artists to maintain friendly relations with those in power (state or regional officials) to be considered for funding, awards, venues to perform, travel opportunities, and more. The arts academies serve as sites to mold and stylize upcoming

²²⁰ Jennifer Lindsay, "A Drama of Change: Cultural Policy and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia," in *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 70.

²²¹ Larasati, *Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Postgenocide Indonesia*.

performing artists in a manner more likely to be supported by the state. Cultural historian Jennifer Lindsay explores how cultural policy (governmental structures, funding, and policies) influences cultural expression itself and vice versa, notably through the state's modern role as patron of the arts with motivations for promoting images of national unity and identity.²²²

The *musjawarah* of 1961, as the focal point of this chapter, provides an opportunity to situate the interests of Indonesian Muslim artists in the midst of heightening political anxiety towards the Left. While not representative of all Muslim artists' perspectives in Indonesia, HSBI was the first Islamic cultural organization to illuminate a path for understanding the imagination and production of Islamic and other Muslim-inspired art. The publication of HSBI's *musjawarah* in *Gema Islam*'s 1962 inaugural issue would have been deeply formative for aspiring and established Muslim artists alike. The *fatwa* described above, as disseminated in their first publication, provided a framework for understanding Islamic art and for legitimizing Islam as Indonesian culture. During this Guided Democracy period of competing ideologies on Indonesia's political landscape, decisions such as HSBI's *fatwa* provided valuable language for others seeking to make room for themselves and for their expressions of Muslim and national identity.

Dynamic scholarly conversations exist that seek to understand Left-aligned cultural organizations like LEKRA in the years leading up to the violent elimination of the communist party.²²³ The events of 1965-66 left a deep and permanent trace on the Indonesian performing arts. Fear of military and government suppression led to the permanent alteration of many traditional

²²² Lindsay, "A Drama of Change: Cultural Policy and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia."

²²³ See: Michael H Bodden, *Resistance on the National Stage: Theater and Politics in Late New Order Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010); Vedi Hadiz, "The Left and Indonesia's 1960s: The Politics of Remembering and Forgetting," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (2006): 554-69; Ruth McVey, "The Wayang Controversy in Indonesian Communism," in *Context, Meaning, and Power in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1986), 21-51; Jennifer Lindsay and Maya H.T. Liem, eds., *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

arts forms in Java, Bali, and Sumatra. While some arts forms were at risk of elimination, others worked to quickly adapt to mask any potential association with the Left and individual artists hid any connection they might have, real or imagined, to communism to become employable under Suharto's New Order. For many, the arts became a mode of unspoken resistance against a regime that actively sought to erase their experiences. Anti-regime messages were embedded into theater and other arts forms as a strategy to reclaim agency in an environment of severe censorship, continuing the legacy of many traditional art forms to contest colonial and postcolonial categorization by enacting allegories of resistance.²²⁴

Because of the potential of the arts as sites of resistance, Leftist groups like LEKRA have received significant scholarly attention in ongoing efforts to elevate the voices of those most severely silenced since the mid-1960s. This work is unquestioningly important, not merely for its ethical import to address human rights violations but also for the urgency of timeliness as those who were old enough to remember the 1965-66 killings are now aging. The focus of this chapter, however, is on modernist Muslim artist organizations, which have in comparison received far less attention. This chapter seeks to compliment what has been studied of "the other side." While it is essential to always recognize the violence that brought about and maintained the New Order, it is valuable to consider how the New Order, for some, enhanced everyday life. Amidst the widespread corruption of Suharto's regime, Suharto promoted pro-Western foreign policy and investments that led to a boosted economy and a growing educated urban middle class.²²⁵ The elimination of Left-wing forces, which those writing for *Gema Islam* (including Hamka) saw as an unfortunate but necessary episode of violence to actualize their goals for the nation, led some to believe that Islam

²²⁴ Sears, *Shadows of Empire*.

²²⁵ Craig Lockard, *Southeast Asia in World History*, New Oxford World History (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 173–75.

would take on greater influence in guiding politics. Bolstered by their cooperation with the Indonesian military, anti-communist modernist Muslim groups believed their voices would finally be heard now that Sukarno's Nasakom political structure was dismantled. Such hopes were quickly dissolved as Suharto sought to control Islam more than bring in Muslim leaders as equals. Suharto was concerned with controlling the population, not mobilizing them. Muslim leaders shifted their attention towards educational, welfare, and missionary efforts, resulting in a deepening of Islamic faith that historian M.C. Ricklefs connects to a rise in devotionism witnessed across the Muslim world in the 1970s, and particularly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979.²²⁶

Drawing attention to HSBI's concerns at its *musjawarah* in the years preceding the 1965 regime change allows for consideration of modernist Islam's positioning in relation to national identity and the ideas that some Muslim artists held when formulating Indonesian Islamic art, identity, and demonstrations of piety. Questions surrounding the permissibility of arts in Islam – and how to define such permissibility in constituting Indonesian Muslim identity – was a central concern. The *musjawarah*'s publication in *Gema Islam* ensured that this meeting held significant weight in guiding others grappling with similar questions of spirituality, creativity, and identity. It also paved the way for other Islamic arts organizations to emerge on Indonesia's cultural landscape to contribute to such questions in multilayered ways, reflecting the diversity of interpretation that is intrinsic to Islamic theology.

Understanding how Muslim artists in Indonesia crafted themselves with intention at this critical moment in the nation's history presumes an inherent relationship between Islam and the arts. In the following section, Islam and the arts will be discussed as co-constituted, and particularly

²²⁶ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: C. 1300 to the Present*, 273.

how scholars formulate the historical relationship between the two as *sejalan* – parallel, analogous paths.

IV. *ISLAM DAN SENI SEJALAN: ISLAM AND THE ARTS ALONG PARALLEL PATHS*

HSBI's *musjawara* decision defines culture as an embodiment of a Muslim's life purpose (*bagi muslimin haruslah menjadi pernjataan tudjuan hidupnja*). Art, as a reflection of culture, should be an act in worship of God's presence (*seni untuk kebaktian kehadiran Allah*) over any individualistic or commercial aims.²²⁷ From an academic standpoint, the issue of art within Islam is most often dredged in arguments over law. Within the Muslim faith, *shari'a* may be understood as divine command, God's moral plan that guides human beings along the path towards salvation. "Islamic law," coined during the era of European imperialism to define *shari'a*, inadequately captures the essence of *shari'a* by binding it within an assumption of a single, universal law. While it is universally accepted amongst Muslims that there is only one *shari'a*, it is equally understood that there is no single person capable of grasping God's true meaning. The Prophet himself was subject to human error in the transmission process.²²⁸

Under the guidance of God's law, or *shari'a*, there can only be imperfect human interpretations of the law. Whether translated into Islamic state laws, Islamic rules enforced by the community, or individual Islamic behaviors, the meaning of *shari'a* is entirely dependent upon *fiqh*, or a person's individual understanding of the meaning of God's law. When discussing matters of Islamic legal history and theory, it is essential to acknowledge the distinction between *shari'a*

²²⁷ Amura, "Musjawarah Besar Seniman dan Kebudajaan Islam," 26.

²²⁸ Arguably, it was during the Prophet's lifetime that there existed clear, unquestioned rules of governance under Islam by following His teachings. As the Muslim world stretched across Africa and Asia after the Prophet's death, processes of localization and adaptation to an Islamic worldview necessitated a wider embrace of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

as “divine law” and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) as “the human understanding of the requirements of the divine law.”²²⁹ With the existence of numerous *fiqh*, the question of “who [speaks] for Islam and how the scriptural sources of the religion would be interpreted” is of critical importance, and vibrant debates have sprung forth across the globe that challenge the assumptions of *shari’a* as a universal, known command.²³⁰ Legacies of dominant colonial discourses to interpret Islam and “Islamic law” contributed to the formation of stagnant, historicized views on what it means to be Muslim and to produce Muslim culture; understanding the historical importance of interpretation itself within Islam reveals the dynamic and subjective nature of Islamic art. Muslim artists are thus motivated to seek appropriate avenues to their creative practices within understood and permitted Islamic ways.

Islamic art is difficult to define. It is reductive to assume that this category encapsulates all art produced by Muslims, as some Muslims may not conceptualize their creativity within the bounds of religion. It is equally inadequate to believe that every Islamic symbol employed in artistic creation is chosen for religious purposes. Sometimes, an arabesque is merely that – an ornamentation. Tracing the history of Islamic art, Blair and Bloom write that it is perhaps best defined by what it is not: “neither a region, nor time period, nor a school, nor a movement, nor a dynasty,” but rather a culture (visual culture, specifically, for their discussion) that spans across centuries and continents reflecting a time when the people followed a particular religion.²³¹ This description is mostly concerned with understanding Islamic art that may or may not be produced for purposes of worship (Islamic architecture or ornamental royal vases, for example). A key

²²⁹ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Sharia and National Law in Iran,” in *Sharia Incorporated: A Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present*, ed. Jan Michiel Otto, Law, Governance, and Development (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010), 366.

²³⁰ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy*, 3.

²³¹ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” *The Art Bulletin* (New York, N.Y.) 85, no. 1 (2003): 153.

challenge in defining Islamic art, and its boundaries of permissibility, is the absence of an international Islamic authority to provide definitive clarity around the various modes of artistic expression. The Muslim faith is grounded in the belief that Muslims possess an individual channel to God and God's grace. There is no need for a priest or other authoritative figure to access God. Islam evolved from deeply egalitarian roots. While many social and political entities take up the mantle of speaking definitively about the laws that govern Islam and Islamic practice, this decentralized authority structure means that various Muslim schools of thought (and individuals by themselves) will offer different, and divergent, opinions over the legality of art.

Western media has contributed to a pervasive misconception that iconophobia and iconoclasm are central tenets of Islam and that *shari'a* represents inherent violence, exemplified in recent decades by media coverage of the Taliban's extremist image destruction. This misconception is based on misinformed beliefs that the Qur'an – the holy text and that with utmost authority – includes a clear prohibition on figurative representation. This restrictive stance would certainly be extended to other productions of art and culture, such as the oral and performed traditions of local Muslim communities. In contemporary Western discourse, these extreme approaches to art within Islam produce an image of Islam as brutal and irrational – traits that colonial narratives also superimposed upon Malay identities in efforts to depict the primitive "other," as explored in Chapter One. Juxtaposed against Western understanding of art and culture, especially the tendency to associate representation of the "accurate" human figure with higher degrees of civilization, reducing Islam to a unilateral prohibition of art and of the human form in art is a loud declaration of Islamic cultures as "backward."²³²

²³² Mia Corbett, "Finding the Islam in Islamic Art: The Relationship between Islamic Law and Artistic Practice," in *Research Handbook on Islamic Law and Society* (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 349.

Disregarding the fundamentalist extremism exhibited by terrorist groups to control and manipulate global Islamic understanding, Muslims are devoted to seeing God's beauty in the world.²³³ Basic understandings of Islam include the exaltation of God as the Creator, with all things in the heavens and earth glorifying Him (59:24 Qur'an, *Surah al-Hashr Ayat 24*). *Hadith* literature also proclaims: *Kataba Allāh al-ihsān 'alā kulli shayyin* (God has inscribed *al-ihsān* (beauty/good) upon all things).²³⁴ With this embrace of beauty within Islamic understandings of the surrounding world, it appears that those who may be suspicious of art do not feel like it is something to be unilaterally prohibited but are rather concerned about distractions from their faith. This anxiety is often attributed to varying understandings of *Surah Luqman Ayat 6* (31:6 Qur'an), which some view as correlating music and musical instruments with idle talk (Satan's whisper). While some may ascribe to this interpretation, most Muslim artists understand this *surah* to be a warning against meaninglessness rather than sweeping prohibition. Art, then, must be imbued with meaning – it must be purposeful and guided by spiritual truth.

The language included in HSBI's *musjawarah* decision discussed in this chapter advances this idea of purposeful Islamic art – art produced with care and intention as opportunities to reflect upon God. While the legal debates discussed above are certainly relevant to the understanding of Islamic art in Indonesia, local Indonesian cultures place equal importance upon Islam and the traditional arts as co-constituted components of local and national identity.²³⁵ In Southeast Asian discourse, the arts and Islam go hand in hand – *sejalan*, as one of my mentors at Institut Seni

²³³ Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, eds., *God Is Beautiful and Loves Beauty: The Object in Islamic Art and Culture* (New Haven; Qatar: Yale University Press; in association with the Qatar Foundation, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar, 2013).

²³⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Jonas Otterbeck for discussing these core principles with me during his short-course on Islam and Creativity at the Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, London, in 2021.

²³⁵ Lahpan, "The Lawfulness of Music in Contemporary Indonesian Debate," 352; See also the collected works in David D. Harnish and Anne K. Rasmussen, eds., *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Indonesia (ISI)-Padangpanjang, Ediwar, would say. This belief is most strongly held by advocates of the *dakwah* arts, in all their variety. For Ediwar, *dakwah* arts begin within small community religious settings, such as the *surau* in Minang culture. Ediwar explains how the arts in Sumatran Muslim contexts function to *mensyiar agama* – to spread religion (lit. to broadcast). Studying *indang Pariaman* from the *surau* to the stage, a style of traditional Minang drumming, dancing, and *syair* vocalization much like *rapa'i* in Aceh, Ediwar writes that these *syair* contain praises to Allah and His prophet, verses from the Qur'an, recitation of the numerous characteristics of Allah, and stories about the Prophet's life.²³⁶ An oral and embodied tradition, *indang* serves as a means of passing down significant religious information across generations – much like *zapin*, the music and dance tradition explored later in Chapter Four. Muslim scholar Abdul Ghani Samsuddin substantiates the relationship between art and Islamic proselytization in the Malay world; he is specifically concerned with the ways in which art deepens an appreciation for knowledge and God's beauty amongst the *ummah* (Muslim community).²³⁷ Febri Yulika, who teaches at ISI-Padangpanjang alongside Ediwar, expands that art is not only a component part of *dakwah* practice, but that it is specifically the medium for preaching: arts practice as *dakwah* practice.²³⁸ *Dakwah*, as discussed earlier, is the invitation to follow God's path and seek Truth (*hakikat*). Assuaging concerns over Islamic legality related to the arts, *dakwah* arts stand firmly in their purposeful position for the Muslim community in Indonesia – such creative practice is therefore far from meaningless.

²³⁶ Ediwar, *Indang Pariaman: Dari Tradisi Surau Ke Seni Pertunjukan Rakyat Minangkabau* (Bandung: Pusat Penelitian dan Pengembangan Pendidikan Seni Tradisional, 2007), 2.

²³⁷ Abdul Ghani Samsuddin, *Seni Dalam Islam*, Cet. 1. (Petaling Jaya: Intel Multimedia and Publication, 2001), 7.

²³⁸ Febri Yulika, *Jejak Seni Dalam Sejarah Islam* (Kota Padang Panjang: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Padangpanjang, 2016), 2, 26.

Indonesian *dakwah* traditions place great emphasis on orality – *syair* (verse), *hikayat* (saga), Minang *kaba* (tale), *khutbah* (sermon), *salawat* (blessings/prayer), and *peribahasa* (proverb) are a handful of oral traditions that facilitate the search for beauty and God’s truth.²³⁹ The practitioner achieves this through crafting their words with care and sometimes playfulness, and the audience through open and sincere listening. Such structure is an extension of the deep significance of the spoken word in Islamic culture. The holy text of the Qur’an is considered to be the purest source of Islamic understanding as God’s express words, as revealed to Muhammad. The oral tradition of memorization and recitation, preserving the Arabic unaltered by translation or interpretation, is a serious responsibility for Muslims as custodians of God’s word. Training the mouth and body in the intricacies of pronunciation and compelling flow in recitation is an act of strength and dedication to the Muslim faith; to listen mindfully is to be blessed by the powerful sound of God’s unaltered Word.²⁴⁰ This culture of sound suggests a possible translation into permissible performing arts practices that, at their core, share verbal and embodied understandings of Islam brought forth by sound.

The understood relationship between art and Islam in Indonesia is reflective of the musical pathways that first introduced Islam to maritime Southeast Asia, brought by those traversing the vast Indian Ocean. Yet this embrace of art’s role in facilitating historical Islamic knowledge transmission by no means indicates that there is no debate over the permissibility or appropriateness of the arts. The social and cultural context that brought about HSBI’s *musjawarah*

²³⁹ H. Saifullah and Febri Yulika, *Sejarah Perkembangan Seni Dan Kesenian Dalam Islam* (Padang: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Padangpanjang, 2012).

²⁴⁰ Anne Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010); There are some, however, who would argue that recitation or other chants (such as *adhan* or *dhikr*) are not considered to be music, as they are inherently a part of ritual practice. See: Amnon Shiloah, “The Status of Traditional Art Music in Muslim Nations,” *Asian Music* 12, no. 1 (1980): 40–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833797>.

is indicative of the strongly felt need to define permissible arts practice within Muslim terms at the beginning of Indonesia's nationhood. One need only look to recent incidents of public outcry sensationalized in the media to view the complex interworking of local tradition, archipelagic Islamic culture (*Islam Nusantara*), and voices of authority. In 2009, West Java's governor Ahmad Heryawan very publicly denounced the popular Sundanese dance *jaipong* as vulgar and pornographic, an event that led to much disagreement over the application of a controversial anti-pornography law, which was approved by parliament earlier that year, to target Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage as well as minority groups.²⁴¹ While not as severe of an accusation, news outlets in 2017 claimed that South Sumatra's popular festival dance, *Tari Gending Sriwijaya*, was under attack from critics who believed the dance stood at odds with Malay Muslim cultural values by commemorating pre-Islamic heritage.²⁴² Both *jaipong* and *Tari Gending Sriwaya* illustrate the problematic issues that arise between Islam and the arts when negotiating regional Indonesian culture and identity.

These two examples are perhaps subject to more severe critique due to their performance by Muslim women, and female Muslim bodies are increasingly sites of control and censorship.²⁴³ As intangible cultural heritage forms that do not have direct ties to *dakwah*, conservative critics are quick to view such behaviors as transgressions of Muslim moral values. Another example to illustrate the negotiation of individual expression and community expectation but within explicitly Islamic art forms is A.D. Pirous, an Acehese painter who witnessed Indonesia's ongoing struggles

²⁴¹ Abdul Khalik, "Jaipong Becomes Latest Victim of Porn Law," *The Jakarta Post*, February 7, 2009, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/02/07/039jaipong039-dance-becomes-latest-victim-pornography-law.html>.

²⁴² Safrin La Batu and Gunawan Apriadi, "Sriwijaya Dance, the Pride of Palembang, under Attack," *The Jakarta Post*, March 20, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/20/sriwijaya-dance-pride-palembang-under-attack.html>.

²⁴³ This pattern of exerting control over female bodies is hardly exclusive to Muslim contexts. As I write my dissertation, the U.S. Supreme Court issued their 2022 decision to overrule *Roe v. Wade*.

for independence from colonial rule as well as postcolonial authoritarian rule. His work is deeply informative of the practical relationship between Qur'anic art and Islamic understandings of law via contemporary art practice. Seeking to make sense of his layered identity as Acehnese, Muslim, and Indonesian, Pirous committed himself to the production of Islamic art *as* Indonesian national art. Yet his choice in selecting Qur'anic calligraphy in his paintings incurred much scrutiny from the wider Islamic community. Some Islamic authorities even accused Pirous of marring the Qur'an by displaying Qur'anic verses that contained errors or had been scratched upon installation in art galleries.²⁴⁴ The public anxiety over his choice of applying Qur'anic script for aesthetic purposes motivated Pirous to employ the aid of an Arabic expert. This act of self-censorship reflects the ethical and cultural expectations set by the Muslim community and Pirous' audience – his individual *ijtihad* (the Islamic interpretive method used to derive *fiqh*) therefore must respond to community readings of the religious texts and symbols he employs.

The works of Pirous, shared by his dedicated biographer, collaborator, and friend Kenneth George, present a compelling framework for understanding a Muslim lifeworld. This concept, expanding upon phenomenological philosophy and existential anthropology developed by anthropologist Michael Jackson, seeks to make sense of the space between social norms and personal feeling.²⁴⁵ For George, the conceptualization of lifeworlds addresses the ongoing circumstances in which we find ourselves culturally, politically, historically, and experientially.²⁴⁶ It actively works against static constructions of religious life. Muslim lifeworlds are continually being worked on, in constant motion to be redefined in response to the interconnected world in

²⁴⁴ Kenneth M. George, "Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Qur'anic Art in Indonesia," *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 4 (2009): 589–621.

²⁴⁵ Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); See also his more recent compilation: Michael Jackson, *How Lifeworlds Work: Emotionality, Sociality, and the Ambiguity of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

²⁴⁶ George, *Picturing Islam*, 4.

which individual artists find themselves. Islamic art, for Pirous, was not ready-made. It presented itself as a journey of discovery, “a path of improvisation and ethical self-cultivation that would transform his lifeworld as a Muslim artist-citizen.”²⁴⁷

This framework is similarly helpful for artist-scholar Nyak Ina Raseuki in her study of *sikke rebana* and *rapa’i*, two Islamic performing arts styles from Kerinci and Aceh provinces in Sumatra. She asks, “Are music and the arts always a sort of battleground between religious formalism and the artist’s search for new meaning?”²⁴⁸ The artists that Raseuki works with, like Pirous, are keenly aware of creating art with deep religious significance and the cultural responsibility that this work holds. Yet as individuals passing down oral and embodied traditions (visual tradition in the case of Pirous), they unconsciously produce new meanings that reflect their interactions with the changing world in which they live. These two frames – the religious and the individual – may appear to diverge, as when artists make new aesthetic choices in response to shifting ideas about Muslim identity, belonging, and performativity. Yet their convergence pivots around ideas of purpose and intention. We therefore return to the discussion at the start of this section surrounding purpose and meaning as core tenets in conceptualizing (and legitimizing) Islamic arts practice.

In discussing the sacrifice of the artist’s ego in favor of the needs of the Muslim community, Pirous once said, “This is the concept of *khairuqum an-fa’aqum linnas* – a person useful to others.”²⁴⁹ Islamic arts, therefore, are quite active sites where practitioners strive to meaningfully reflect upon God and search for divine truth; at the same time, practitioners encourage those in

²⁴⁷ George, 53.

²⁴⁸ Nyak Ina Raseuki, *Being Islamic in Music: Two Contemporary Genres from Sumatra*, First edition. (Jakarta: Pascasarjana IKJ, 2017), 7.

²⁴⁹ George, *Picturing Islam*, 61.

their audience to reflect upon their own individual journeys towards truth as they engage with the performed/visual material. Anthropologist Ronald Lukens-Bull writes, “Indonesian Islam has a strong pietistic element, meaning that doing right is left to the individual’s conscience. The place of preachers and teachers is to heighten awareness (*keyakinan*) so that people will be inspired to live as good Muslims.”²⁵⁰ Arts practice as *dakwah* practice, as Febri Yulika argued above, is an extension of this potent social responsibility for artists to raise spiritual *keyakinan* amongst their audience. *Dakwah* efforts require constant negotiation based on changing societal and personal needs at a given time. Indonesian arts practice as *dakwah* shows that Islam must be flexible, lived, and applied to both respond to and influence the everyday experiences and lifeworlds of Muslims.

To conclude this chapter, the questions that inspired this part of the dissertation – how the arts are understood within Islamic terms, what constitutes permissibility, and by whose authority – are considered together in how they frame the controversial reactions that arose after the performance of a play written and directed by Minang playwright Wisran Hadi in 1995 just before the fall of Suharto’s New Order. This story illustrates the interplay of meaning and intention within Islamic constructions of legitimate arts practice.

V. CONCLUSION

On the evening of October 13th, 1995 *Bumi Teater*, a Minang theater group led by Wisran Hadi, performed a dress rehearsal of their play titled *Imam Bonjol*. This rehearsal took place the night before *Bumi Teater* was scheduled to perform at Festival Istiqlal II in 1995, the second of two large festivals organized by Suharto’s New Order government to showcase Islamic arts and

²⁵⁰ Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, *Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Continuity and Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 130.

culture in the archipelago.²⁵¹ What might have been an ordinary dress rehearsal became extraordinary by the presence of armed members of the Indonesian army, standing at attention near the front of the stage. Sahrul, then a young actor and member of *Bumi Teater*, recalled: “[Pemerintah] menganggap bahwa ini akan bisa membuat masyarakat, orang Minang di Jakarta, ngamuk.”²⁵² The government, anticipating that Minang people living around Jakarta would become angry after viewing this performance, brought in armed soldiers as “escorts” for the performers. As for the audience, it was standing room only – quite surprising for a dress rehearsal. In attendance was the head of MUI, religious figures, state officials, as well as invited members of the Minang community.

This dress rehearsal was in fact a trial run, planned by Festival Istiqlal’s organizing committee in response to a letter that had arrived from the governor of West Sumatra urging the committee to reconsider including *Imam Bonjol* in the festival’s schedule of events. *Imam Bonjol*’s writer and director, Wisran Hadi, had been accused by his Minang community in Padang of offending the memory of Tuanku Imam Bonjol, an Islamic Padri leader of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and today regarded, albeit controversially, as an Indonesian National Hero. Despite the initial disapproval of the Padri movement towards traditional Minangkabau *adat* (custom), Imam Bonjol is regarded as an Islamic cultural icon in West Sumatra.²⁵³ After *Bumi Teater*

²⁵¹The first Festival Istiqlal took place in 1991 at Masjid Istiqlal in Jakarta and the second (and final) festival in 1995. At Festival Istiqlal I, President Suharto, in great ceremony, became the first official calligrapher for the Al-Qur’an Mushaf Istiqlal (the National Independence Illuminated Qur’an) when he wrote *Basmallah* in the opening *surah*. Both festivals invited Islamic artists from across Indonesia to perform in Jakarta and meet other Islamic artists – in addition to *Bumi Teater*, several other *dakwah* arts practitioners from West Sumatra were invited, including Haji Rustam, a *tukang salawat dulang* discussed in Chapter Three. For further discussion of these festivals, see: Kenneth M. George, “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 3 (1998): 693–713.

²⁵² Interview with Sahrul N, interview by Katia Chaterji, October 30, 2019.

²⁵³ The Padang campus of Indonesia’s National Islamic University, *Universitas Islam Negeri*, is named after Imam Bonjol. Reconciliation between *padri* and *adat* groups led to the now commonplace Minang adage, *Adat Basandi Syara’, Syara’ Basandi Kitabullah* (*adat* based on the *shari’a*, *shari’a* based on the Qur’an). See: Jeffrey Hadler,

rehearsed *Imam Bonjol* locally in Padang, the Padang-based newspaper *Mingguan Canang* reported that Hadi made a grave error in representing the icon of Imam Bondol as weak, indecisive, and cowardly.²⁵⁴ In portraying Imam Bonjol in such unflattering ways, the play dishonored his memory; *Mingguan Canang* urged a boycott. This was not an isolated reaction in the Minang context. In his letter, the governor wrote that if the play goes forward as planned, he would not be held responsible for any outcry that may take place amongst Minang viewers.²⁵⁵ He urged the committee to block *Bumi Teater* from performing. The committee decided to take a middle path – instead of placing a restriction upon *Imam Bonjol* themselves, they organized a dress rehearsal on the night before *Bumi Teater*'s first public performance to gauge the reactions of diverse groups within the Muslim community.

Ultimately, those who witnessed the dress rehearsal in Jakarta – figures of Islamic authority and members of the community – agreed that the play did not violate Islam or abuse historical memory in its representation of Imam Bonjol. The play was permitted to continue and would go on to perform for three consecutive nights at Festival Istiqlal II, each time to a full audience. But the events surrounding *Imam Bonjol*'s possible censorship reveal contemporary anxieties around the representation of religious leaders in the arts. Hadi's strongest opposition was based on the belief that he portrayed Imam Bonjol in a disrespectful manner by including scenes of him as an imperfect leader during the Padri movement and conflict – in the play, Imam Bonjol doubted himself and his purpose, and he eventually fled to go into isolation. Yet for Hadi himself, he believed he represented Imam Bonjol in a way that aligned with the purity of truth within Islam: only God is perfect. Sahrul, one of Hadi's performers, explains that Hadi was most concerned with

Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009).

²⁵⁴ Quoted in Sahrul N, *Teater Dalam Kritik* (Padangpanjang: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Padangpanjang, 2017), 73.

²⁵⁵ Sahrul N, 34.

representing Imam Bonjol as a human – and an imperfect human, as we all are.²⁵⁶ Hadi had grown frustrated with the tendency to commemorate historical figures as though they were beyond-human beings. He sought to represent Imam Bonjol’s humanity, and in doing so, exalt God’s singular perfection.

Another aspect that contributed to Hadi’s portrayal of Imam Bonjol was his disillusionment with historical understanding during the New Order, specifically the state-sanctioned histories that silenced certain voices in order to achieve national goals, without regard for regionalism. Hadi was motivated to utilize theater to provide avenues for alternate historical understandings, and he maintained this perspective throughout his long career. *Bumi Teater* was established in 1979, over a decade prior to their participation in Festival Istiqlal, with Hadi Wisran as the head. He had grown frustrated by the inadequate representation of arts from West Sumatra on the emerging Indonesian national stage in venues like Taman Ismail Marzuki (founded 1968). Hadi and the other artists behind *Bumi Teater* came together to answer this imbalance through locally produced, Minang-inspired theater. Under Hadi’s leadership, the theater group saw tremendous growth: beginning with 30 members, *Bumi Teater* boasted 300 members by their second year and subgroups had formed especially in local schools across West Sumatra. It produced 50 plays in its first 40 years in existence, several of which Hadi had submitted to the Jakarta Arts Council’s National Contest for Playwriting (*Sayembara Penulisan Naskah Sandiwara Nasional Dewan Kesenian Jakarta*) and won, an annual competition between the mid-1970s and 1990s.

Hadi himself brought significant positive attention towards the role of theater in Indonesian national arts, and his Minang heritage led to his frequent exploration of Muslim themes. Perhaps due to his popularity, his work faced frequent scrutiny by those seeking to preserve certain ideas

²⁵⁶ Interview with Sahrul N.

of Islamic culture and representation. In the case of *Imam Bonjol*, Hadi encountered regional hegemony of a people who resisted alternate representations of a Minang religious and cultural figure. Hadi's response reveals the dynamic arguments over the purpose behind Islamic art. His rejection of the adoration of national figures inspires others in the Muslim community to reflect upon the morality of directing such praise to those other than God himself.

This chapter explores how Indonesian Muslim art, identity, and piety interact with issues of permissibility in Indonesia during the final years of Sukarno's presidency and Suharto's New Order regime. It centers the place that the organization HSBI holds in Indonesia's cultural history, the foundation of its magazine *Gema Islam*, and the details of its landmark 1961 *fatwa* that outlined the boundaries of permissible Islamic arts practice in a nation seeking to define itself. Constructed against anxieties over communism in Indonesian social and cultural life, modernist Islamic groups such as HSBI continually worked to bolster an Islamic anti-communist front. The arts, as is frequently the case, become sites over which political and cultural tensions are negotiated.

This chapter also engages with ideas of beauty within Islam and Islamic representations in the visual and performing arts. In accepted understandings of Islamization in the islands that make up today's Indonesia, art and music are esteemed as valuable cultural modes through which Islamic information was shared and embedded within existing local traditions. The compatibility between Islam and the arts in a place like Indonesia is reflected in the countless diverse styles that are deemed important as *dakwah* in local terms. The *dakwah* arts of Sumatra are numerous and each has unique complex histories related to how they encountered Islam and continue to participate in local constructions of Islamic identity. While Chapter One engaged with foreign colonial misrepresentations of Malay culture that presented an image of Malayness against which Malay Muslim artists today assert and affirm their layered identities, this chapter engages with how

Islamic cultural organizations mobilized over the long history of Islam and arts practice, with particular focus on how these voices position issues of legitimacy and the bounds of permissible arts practice. In the final two chapters of this dissertation, two *dakwah* traditions are explored in greater depth. The mystical Minang tradition *salawat dulang* and the popular Malay tradition *zapin* each shape the upcoming chapters' discussion of Islamic histories and negotiations of modern Muslim identity.

Of relevance to the upcoming chapters is the standardization of arts education that began under Suharto's New Order. The modernist Muslim voices that informed HSBI's *fatwa* on Islamic arts became active participants in how Islamic art forms were categorized and documented, efforts that aided the New Order's hierarchy of arts – and what versions of these arts – may be incorporated into national curriculum (and what, conversely, would be excluded). The voices most prominent in the following two chapters represent artists who were trained during the New Order in the national arts academies. For them, the legacy of the 1960s – the violent anti-communist massacres of 1965-66 and the complicated relationship of complicity between Islam and anti-communism through arts groups – is still felt in how Islamic artists understand themselves and their craft. In this dissertation's exploration of performance and piety through *dakwah* art forms as agents of Islamic histories, this chapter's objective is important in order situate the sociocultural and political landscape that shaped the ways in which the Islamic arts are taught, performed, and witnessed today.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPROVISING SUFIS: REFERENCE AND INNOVATION IN *SALAWAT DULANG* AND MINANG REPRESENTATIONS OF ISLAMIC HISTORY

Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah.

Custom is based on shari'a, shari'a is based on the Holy Qur'an.

- Minang adage

This chapter looks closely at *salawat dulang*, an oral tradition of the Minang people of West Sumatra that employs a metal plate – *dulang* – and the voice to deliver *dakwah*. Oral histories trace the development of *salawat dulang* to the teachings of a Sufi teacher aligned with tarekat Syattariyah (a Sufi brotherhood) named Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh, and who was believed to have lived for over 200 years between 1730-1930. Focusing on the stories that practitioners tell of *salawat dulang*'s history in the region and studying the manner in which it is taught and performed in and around Indonesia's arts academy in Padangpanjang, this chapter argues that *salawat dulang* negotiated its survival and relative success through two stylistic elements: its unwavering Islamic educational core and its inherent flexibility to innovate. If either is lacking from *salawat dulang* practice, the form loses cultural relevance and struggles to thrive. These elements are what protected *salawat dulang*'s legacy, particularly at a time when other art forms were under scrutiny or at risk of censorship during Suharto's New Order. The mindset of Islamic cultural organizations discussed in Chapter Two is relevant here in situating the perspectives of *salawat dulang*'s primary practitioners and teachers today, and it provides a framework for understanding Indonesian Islamic arts and identity construction. In performing *salawat dulang* and its history, practitioners at once substantiate the long history of Islam along Sumatra's coasts from Aceh to West Sumatra, establish a credible Islamic lineage, and position themselves as spiritual guides in the pursuit of Islamic knowledge – a multifaceted role that intersects with individual negotiations of global and local

Muslim belongingness. We begin by shadowing Firdaus, my mentor and *salawat dulang* instructor, as he participates in formalized knowledge transmission at the arts academy.

I. *ALAM MINANGKABAU: SALAWAT DULANG AND ISLAMIC ARTS EDUCATION IN WEST SUMATRA*

June is a busy month on the Institut Seni Indonesia-Padangpanjang campus. At the close of the semester, undergraduate students prepare for their final exams in theoretical and practical courses. Yawning in the courtyard of the Karawitan (Traditional Music) Department one morning, I feel at odds with the frenzy of students lining up to sit for makeup exams, some anxiously reviewing *catatan lagu* (song notes), others lounging confidently, lit cigarettes nestled between fingers. Today, students interested in retaking their exam in *salawat dulang* have the option to play once more in front of Pak Firdaus, a member of the Karawitan faculty who specializes in the Minang oral and percussive tradition of *salawat dulang*. I meet with Firdaus several times weekly to discuss *salawat dulang*, practice the drumming style, and attend various performances around West Sumatra together; save for this day, I had few opportunities to observe Firdaus administering an exam and critiquing students' technique in real time. Ignoring the growing ache in my legs and shoulders after two hours of physical *randai* practice that morning, I prepared myself for an interesting, and long, exam day.

Firdaus arrives, wearing his quintessential pointed snakeskin leather shoes. When I grasp his right hand between both of mine in *salam*, I feel the coolness of his large river stone rings against my skin, one deep blue and the other white. I am reminded that when he performs, Firdaus uses his rings to audibly accentuate the drumming of the *dulang*, especially during the more dynamic *lagu cancang* section. Amidst the usual onomatopoeic drumming syllables *tum* and *tak*, Firdaus' rings intersperse a metallic *ting* to the sonic mix. I asked Firdaus once whether he finds it

distracting to perform while wearing his heavy rings. He responded that his rings are always with him, thus they are a part of him – instead of posing a challenge to him, they improve his skill by imparting *jiwa* (spirit) into his performance persona. Firdaus considers *jiwa* to be an important assessment category in his *salawat dulang* exams. In addition to the students’ ability to memorize the lengthy text, their mastery of the drumming rhythm, and their attention to vocal detail, Firdaus carefully considers the students’ *jiwa* – their spirit. Deeper than enthusiasm for the music, *jiwa* implies a self-awareness and self-confidence to know oneself, without the need to alter one’s personality except to strive for continued improvement. This self-knowledge and desire for continuous self-improvement is reflective of an inner purity and beauty that is a source of inspiration and appreciation within the Minang Islamic performing arts. At ISI-Padangpanjang, Firdaus instructs his students to identify their authentic *jiwa* in his *salawat dulang* class...yet for his coming-of-age students in their second year on campus, this remains a tall order.

For today’s makeup exam, Firdaus and I sit on the floor along the front wall of a Karawitan classroom. He hands me a bag to unpack; two brass *dulang* instruments are nestled inside, each wrapped in checkered fabric to protect the metal. *Dulang* means “tray” in Bahasa Minang, and colloquially it refers to the style of large plate that is used to serve 4-5 people each at large communal events like *makan bajamba*. When played, the *dulang* is held upright on top of the player’s foot. The “top” of the *dulang* (that is the side that, if used as an eating tray, would hold food) faces the player’s body; the “bottom” faces the audience and is used for percussion (figure 3.1). Made from high-quality brass, the two *dulang* instruments that I unwrap are hefty, measuring approximately 65 centimeters in diameter. Like most *dulang*, these two feature decorative leaf patterns along the raised rim edge, though occasionally some *dulang* have inscriptions in Arabic instead (figure 3.2). Considered an antique object and heirloom (*pusaka*), some *dulang* are said to

have been imported from India long ago, but most are made locally today, including the two to be used in Firdaus' *salawat dulang* examination.



Figure 3.1: Demonstration of *salawat dulang* positioning during the *khutbah*. Performing in this photograph is Arjuna Minang, the name of Firdaus' group. This name is unique in the Minangkabau context and reflects Firdaus' time in Surakarta when he was younger. The Mahabharata, in which Arjuna is a prominent figure, is not as culturally significant in West Sumatra as it is in Java. Influenced by his time in Java, Firdaus occasionally goes by Fir Arjuna as a stage name.

Source: Katia Chaterji



Figure 3.2: A *dulang* with a foot stand on display at Istana Baso Pagaruyung, the palace complex of the former Pagaruyung kingdom near Batusangkar, West Sumatra. The rim of this *dulang* is highly decorated with geometric patterns.

Source: Katia Chaterji

When the first two students enter the classroom, I hand each of them a *dulang*. While the Karawitan Department offers *salawat dulang* instruction, there are no *dulang* in the music room or stored in the instrument archive. As I come and go from the Karawitan office, I occasionally run into students waiting patiently to borrow *dulang* from Firdaus or another *salawat dulang* instructor. But what I see more often are students practicing with whatever else they have access to – binders, notebooks, plastic trays, even their own body. They must innovate and use their imagination to practice the percussion. The two female students who just entered Firdaus' classroom for their make-up exam likely had few opportunities to practice with a real brass *dulang*, and the weight and feel of the instrument is significant enough to pose many exam-day challenges.

Traditionally performed as a duet, *salawat dulang* is an oral tradition of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra, upon whose lands the campus of Institut Seni Indonesia-Padangpanjang rests. This art form's name is composed from the Minang words *salawat* (from the Arabic salat/shalat/sholat, meaning "prayers to/blessings on Allah and the Prophet Muhammad") and *dulang* ("tray," see above).²⁵⁷ The two performers sit cross-legged in *duduak* style next to one another and sing in the form of Minang *syairs*, accompanied by their rhythmic beating of the *dulang*. *Syairs*, similar to Malay *pantuns*, are strophic quatrains that allow for (and in fact encourage) a high degree of improvisatory freedom on the part of the performer. Perhaps the flexibility required of Firdaus' students to practice using whatever percussive device they can find is a way for those students to become comfortable with the open-ended improvisation that marks *salawat dulang* performance.

At the core of *salawat dulang* is its function as *dakwah* arts performance, one that entertains its audiences with measured percussion and vocals while simultaneously shares stories about God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Pillars of Islam in the local Minang language. Believed to have developed alongside the Sufi brotherhood (*tarekat*) Syattariyah in northern and western Sumatra, *salawat dulang* is a productive site to interrogate the arts' historical contributions to Islamic cultural knowledge production and the role of practitioners in redefining the tradition to suit contemporary needs. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which *salawat dulang* practitioners from the 1970s onward participated in local Islamic identity formation and in the legitimization of the region's Islamic history, all while they mainstream popularized a traditional art form through innovative media and performance techniques. And one of the significant changes that took place

²⁵⁷ The genre has various names and spellings. *Salawat* may also be spelled *selawat* or *salawaik*, and *dulang* is often interchangeable with *talam*. All combinations refer to this art form. I use *salawat dulang* because this was the most commonly used spelling at ISI-Padangpanjang and by Firdaus, my teacher.

to the art form over the last 50 years is its integration into the Indonesian arts academy at Padangpanjang which, in addition to a standardized national curriculum, boasts a strong academic focus on the Minang Malay arts.²⁵⁸

The two female students who entered the classroom first give *salam* to Firdaus, then take the *dulang* from me, and finally sit on the floor opposite us. They sit in *duduak*, sitting so close to each other that their knees touch. Resting the *dulang* on the arch of one foot (wrapping that foot first with a loose cardigan for padding), they settle into the first position of *salawat dulang* for the *khutbah*, a vocal invocation to God before the percussion begins (figure 3.3). The two young women hold the *dulang* steady with their right hands bracing the lower rim and their left hands resting atop the upper rim. The fingers of their left hands are partially closed in a loose fist, palms facing outward and the thumb and index finger touching gently in what looks like a left-handed *vitarka* mudra from statues of the Buddha (figure 3.4).



Figure 3.3: Close-up view of *duduak* style. The *dulang* rests atop the right foot, usually padded with *kain* (cloth) as shown here.



Figure 3.4: *Tukang salawat dulang* performing the *khutbah*, thumb and index finger touching.

²⁵⁸ This arts campus was founded in 1965 as Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI) Padangpanjang with a focus on traditional Minangkabau arts. Its name and status changed in 1999 based on governmental decree to become Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI) Padangpanjang and expanded its offerings to include Karawitan, Tari, and later Music, Theater, and Fine Arts. In 2010, the campus transitioned, along with the other STSI campuses across Indonesia, to become Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Padangpanjang and began to offer postgraduate programs as well. In Chapter One of her book, Jennifer Fraser provides a helpful history of this campus and its various nomenclatures. See: Fraser, *Gongs and Pop Songs: Sounding Minangkabau in Indonesia*.

Source: Katia Chaterji

Source: Katia Chaterji

Debi, sitting to our left (stage right, if at a performance), is performing as *induk*, the leader of the duo.²⁵⁹ Her partner, Shinty, is *anak*, the follower (lit. “child”). Eyes closed, Debi begins:

Aaaa...ei...yo...aaa...ooo
Aaaa...ei...yo...Nabi Allah ho Nabi yooo...

Debi’s voice is delicate, but she does not falter in her vocal undulations, creating an atmosphere of meditative chanting. As Debi lingers on her last *yooo*, Shinty joins softly in the background:

Aaaa...ei...yo...oooo...

Both Debi and Shinty keep their eyes closed, and their heads are tilted down towards the floor. In this position, the *dulang* covers the lower half of their faces, so I can hear, but not see, the two women producing their vocal sounds. Eventually they sing in unison, softly still but with an accelerated pace:

Allah...Allah
Aaayooo...ju...unju...ngan...
Aaa...ei...Allah, Allahurabbi, rabbihurabbi
Allahurabbi bak tuhan kito Nabi Muhammad...

If I had observed Debi and Shinty singing in this manner when I first arrived in *Alam Minangkabau* months prior,²⁶⁰ I would have dismissed their quiet, closeted demeanor as a shyness, or perhaps even embarrassment, typical of young adult female students placed under a spotlight during an examination. *Salawat dulang* is predominantly a male performative space, and the few *tukang perempuan* (female practitioners) that I did meet displayed a more reserved and quiet vocal style in contrast with male practitioners whose energetic performances drew eager audiences. But

²⁵⁹ *Induk* (Minang; Bahasa Indonesia, *induk*) is a term for “mother.” This word is also used in other Minang *dakwah* performing arts such as *indang* and *dikia mauluik*. In both, *induk* is used to refer to the largest frame drum of the group, usually played by the group leader. It is interesting to note that the Minangkabau community follow a matrilineal structure, a tradition that may be reflected in the use of terms for “mother” as head/leader.

²⁶⁰ *Alam Minangkabau* refers to the lands where the Minang people live and includes today’s mainland West Sumatra province (excludes the Mentawai islands).

with each performance I attended and with each new practitioner I met, I learned that my tendency to dismiss inward, closeted performance styles was based on an unjustified assumption of heteronormative gender acts – that of the demure feminine and the dynamic masculine. It is not that *salawat dulang* challenges the traditional Minang gender ideology; in fact, *salawat dulang* in many ways reinforces heteronormative gender as a socially constructed, and inherited, system that regulates all human behavior and by which all bodies are “gendered.”²⁶¹ Rather than a gender act, Debi and Shinty’s propensity for quiet and soft vocal style is suggestive of *salawat dulang*’s deeper relationship with mystical Islam. In shifting the focal point of their voice and body inward, Debi and Shinty demonstrate their individual understanding of *salawat dulang* as a spiritual practice, one that begins with an exploration of inner meditation.

The presentation of the voice and body are deeply significant in this understanding of *salawat dulang*. Traditional Minang vocal music encourages soft, ornamented singing styles to attract positive energy from the universe and from benevolent spirits. Loud, course singing, in contrast, is considered dangerous because it frightens away good spirits and attracts malevolent ones. *Salawat dulang* practitioners acknowledge the need to attract positive energy, as their craft exposes them to negativity – at someone’s ill will, a practitioner could lose their voice, forget the lengthy text, or even come to bodily harm mid-performance.²⁶² The chant-like quality in *salawat dulang*’s *khutbah* is a means of focusing the singer’s energy inward, towards attracting mystical power from benevolent forces that will aid their performance and their ability to recall numerous

²⁶¹ Ellen Koskoff, “From Women to Gender,” in *A Feminist Ethnomusicology. New Perspectives on Gender in Music* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 27; Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 271.

²⁶² Firdaus once shared with me that the platform stage collapsed on him one time mid-performance. Another memory he shared was when he lost his voice before a scheduled performance, leading to him seeking a replacement for him. Both instances are understood as examples of potential negative energy exposure.

texts. There are many Minang and Malay vocal styles that require incredible memorization and improvisation skills. Generally referred to as *tukang pantun* (a singer of pantun quatrains), these artists are admired not only for their musical talent but also for their internal strength and power to remember, and innovate from, lengthy texts and countless poems. *Tukang salawat dulang* are similarly celebrated.

Such internal strength is traditionally associated with shamans, who harness unique supernatural powers to accomplish their work. Moreover, the *dulang* sometimes features in magical activity to aid a shaman's concentration in preparation of their tasks. In a tiger-catching ceremony documented by Margaret Kartomi in 1972 in Nagari Panyakalan, two *pawang manangkok harimau* (shamans specially trained to capture wild tigers) began the ritual by closing their eyes, singing, and shielding their faces with a *dulang* to provide cover as they sought to build their mystical power, transferring power from supernatural forces.²⁶³ Once granted, the shamans found themselves able to recall the difficult phrases required to perform the tiger-catching ceremony in full. While far removed from shamanistic activity, Debi and Shinty's *khutbah* (their slow chanting with eyes closed and the *dulang* carefully positioned to obscure half of their faces) is evocative of such traditions to harness internal strength and power, traditions that are considered a part of the lineage of Islamic religious training through Sufi-style religious concentration as part of *tasawwuf* – Islamic mysticism.²⁶⁴ The rhythmic motion and vocal intoning in this chant-like

²⁶³ Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra*, 2012, 33.

²⁶⁴ While the word "Sufi" may not be used elsewhere in Indonesia (and may, in fact, be viewed as a pejorative), in Minang *salawat dulang* circles the words "Sufi" and *tasawwuf* (an Arabic word used locally to define Sufi, and vice versa) are frequently employed and understood as foundational knowledge systems for traditional performing arts. *Salawat dulang* traces its spiritual lineage through tarekat Syattariyah (the Syattariyah Sufi brotherhood), but this process is not unique to *salawat dulang*. Tarekat Naqshbandiyah, for example, was also active in western Sumatra and positioned the musical form known as *zikir rebano* as a legitimate source of Islamic knowledge. *Indang*, a dance style using drums, is similarly rooted in Sufi pathways of mystical learning.

introductory sequence transports the self into a state of union with Allah, a crucial feature of Sufi musical genres across the Muslim world.

The expression of union with God is also visible in the position of the player's hands in the *khutbah* sequence. A purely vocal introduction, the players merely hold the *dulang* in place in front of the body, with the right hand stabilizing the bottom edge and the left hand resting atop the upper edge. The left hand is closed into a loose fist, flexed at the wrist so that the palm faces outward. The thumb and index finger touch, forming the *mudra* known as *vitarka*, best known from statues of a cross-legged Buddha inviting debate and deliberation from his audience. In Sufi teachings (*tasawwuf*) of the body in Islam, the thumb serves as a constant reminder of Allah and the index finger is a symbol indicating the Prophet Muhammad. Resting these two fingers against one other in constant connection represents the inseparability of Muhammad and Allah (figure 3.4, above). These two meanings behind the *khutbah* hand position bring to my mind the syncretic foundation of Islam in Sumatra. *Salawat dulang* practitioners are trained in a discourse-based tradition that is a meditation on Islamic practice in daily Minang life, joining the Hindu-Buddhist symbol of debate with the equally recognizable symbol of God's Oneness and the inseparability of God and His prophet. These practitioners are uniquely positioned in Minang social life to interrogate the meaning of Islamic teachings and aid the community in a fuller understanding of the faith. Using the contact between thumb and index finger, practitioners signal toward their role as interpreters, building upon pre-Islamic behaviors of the past and moving towards Islamic mystical understanding through meditation and deep concentration.

Hearing Debi and Shinty's *khutbah*, I feel my heartbeat slow down to follow their careful intonation and elongated rhythmic patterns. As a musician and dancer, I am most comfortable using my body non-verbally to express and communicate in performance. To sing, and especially

to chant in this manner, strikes me as a deeply vulnerable act that I find most challenging. I watch these two women in awe, remembering my lesson with Firdaus earlier that week when I rigidly completed the *khutbah* with far too much focus on prescribed meter than spontaneous flow. Debi and Shinty are brave, I think, and unbothered by the presence of others. This is a purely internal experience – with the support of their vocal partner, they together reveal the intention behind the *khutbah* as that of heightening one’s individual sense of self, using repetition and elongated rhythms to encourage a state of mental and physical focus to prepare for the task at hand.

Eventually, Debi and Shinty move past the *khutbah* and begin to incorporate the *dulang* into their performance. They tap the *dulang* delicately as they proceed to the *lagu batang* and *yamolai* sections, using their righthand palm on the center of the instrument but just the ring and middle finger of the left hand on the upper edge. With the added sound of the brass instrument, their voices are nearly drowned out and I see them break from their internal focus to look at each other to help remember the complicated phrases. Debi leads with a two-line *syair*, followed by Shinty with another two-line *syair*:

*Aaa...yo...Allah, ngah, ei Allah...ei Allah...
 Allah Illah delai yo waa...ing, Ilallah
 Iyo diya...Allah iyo....delaituanku, Hurabbi...
 Iyo Muhammad itu...delai urang di, Imakah
 Alai sabananyo rasul delai kulifa, Oallah...
 Iyo Allah badiri delai dengan seri, Dirinyo
 Wakiyamuhu banafsihi deya itu si, Ifatnyo...
 Matilah yo kamu lai didalamku, Ilama
 Di dalam kulimah de la Ilahaha...Ilallah
 Diakui nabi masuak sarugo ... (dll.)*

While professional *tukang salawat dulang* improvise each text mid-performance, many practitioners have preferred set texts on which they base their performance. For the purposes of instruction, Firdaus gives his students one of his texts for them to memorize and perform, with no need to improvise just yet. While Debi and Shinty performed the *khutbah* calmly and adeptly, they

stumble through the sections with *dulang* percussion. Their eyes open now, they frequently glance at one another to prompt the other's line, peek down at their notes resting on the floor, or to simply smile and laugh when one of them makes a mistake. But unlike other students I had observed who need to stop entirely because they are lost within the text or cannot fall into the right rhythm, Debi and Shinty persevere until the end.²⁶⁵ I hear the recognizable final phrases, sung in unison, as an affirmation of Islamic identity and the declaration of the faith:

*Agamo Islam adalai agamo kito, agamo Islam adalai agamo kito
de Ilallah, Allah, Allah...
Aaa...ooo...eee...annanao...*

Debi and Shinty put down their *dulang* after presenting their examination material for the last 20 minutes.²⁶⁶ I take the opportunity to adjust my legs, as both feet fell asleep during this time. When playing the *dulang*, you must keep your legs in the same position for the duration of the performance. The *dulang*, which is always placed atop the arch of the foot, is cold and heavy on one's skin, and I recall how uncomfortable it feels unless you wrap your foot with a sweater or some other fabric. Even still, the cross-legged position and the weight of the *dulang* for such a long period of time make it very difficult to get up immediately after performing. Debi and Shinty have both adjusted their feet to sit with knees together, feet pointing back to one side. I flash Debi a knowing smile as I catch her massaging her foot, trying to smooth the tingles away.

Firdaus uses this time to provide his commentary on their performance. I note that he hasn't adjusted his legs since he first sat down – he is a seasoned performer and his stamina, mental focus, and body control are always visible to me in how long he can stay seated without needing to move

²⁶⁵ For the purposes of a course exam, Firdaus only asks students to perform the *khutbah*, *lagu batang*, and *yamolai*. The *lagu cancang*, which is typically the longest and most improvised section, is studied in theory only, as is the final *penutup* section.

²⁶⁶ This 20-minute performance is an abridged version for the purpose of Firdaus' exam. Typical *salawat dulang* sets will last between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

or stretch. Sitting next to this stoic presence, I feel very young, and embarrassingly restless. Firdaus compliments both students' enunciation of the text and their vocal style, but he is unsatisfied with their drumming. *Mana yang singkop tidak jelas*, he tells them ("the syncopated part is unclear"), letting his gaze linger on Shinty, who as the *anak* player (lit. "child"; here meaning secondary player) controls the *singkop* part. Syncopated drumming patterns, those that place stress on the weaker counts or the off beats within a given measure of time, are a main source of rhythmic embellishment in *salawat dulang* duets.²⁶⁷ Without it, the call-and-response vocal structure (*induk* leading with a two-line *syair*, *anak* following with another two lines, and so on) lacks the support and depth from the interaction of two drums.

But despite Debi and Shinty's weaker drumming technique, I sit back in admiration of these two women. As Karawitan ("Traditional Music") second-year undergraduate students, they will have ample opportunity on campus to practice their percussion and understand stylistic standards. What isn't easily taught – and what remains elusive for many young players – is the disciplining of the body and the mind through internal reflection and self-knowledge. It is the individual exploration of *jiwa* – spirit, soul – that marks *salawat dulang* as a deeply introspective art form that facilitates Islamic understandings of beauty and logic. In Debi and Shinty's *khutbah*, I located the potential for *salawat dulang* to expand students' lived experience of Islam to include deep and intentional concentration, one that references past practices while allowing for continued transformation. The *khutbah* evokes, in a sense, what Barbara Rosenwein calls the "emotional communities" that shape the way emotion is valued and expressed in local context and that grant

²⁶⁷ In larger ensembles of other Malay percussive styles, however, syncopation is often folded into a more complex interlocking rhythmic pattern, where different rhythmic parts alternate with one another to complete the full rhythmic line. A good example is visible in the interlocking *indang* frame drum rhythms that mirror the drum and gong parts of the traditional Minang *talempong* gong-chime ensemble. This example is a valuable place to see the combination of pre-Muslim and Muslim elements in instrumentation.

access to “emotional inheritances,” the accrued knowledge base of older emotional traditions coexisting with the present, suggesting the adaptation of the old to address the new.²⁶⁸ The value of considering emotional communities within the Minang Islamic performing arts is that they respond to and actively generate memory. When the past is evoked through performative formats such as *salawat dulang*, it is recalled and remembered with specific purpose – it appeals to the listener’s pre-existing emotional inheritances, to a collective memory of spiritual syncretism and Sufi-led Islamization along Sumatra’s west coast.

This chapter explores *salawat dulang*’s potential to bring local histories of Islam to life and into relevance for its practitioners and audiences. In popularizing their craft, practitioners from the 1970s onward – today’s elders and teachers of the upcoming generation of arts practitioners – participated in local Islamic identity formation and utilized their position within the tradition to legitimize the region’s long Islamic history. Yet they did so under the extraordinary pressures of Suharto’s New Order government, a 30-year dictatorship that required acquiescence and conformity across all sectors, including the arts. I argue that *salawat dulang* forged a stronghold for itself to not only survive but thrive under the New Order on the basis of two stylistic elements: its Islamic content and value, as exhibited in Debi and Shinty’s *khutbah* above, and the form’s built-in flexibility to innovate and respond to the immediate context, best exemplified in other sections such as the *lagu cancang*. These two elements protected *salawat dulang*’s legacy and made space for practitioners to explore new avenues for the form. Any compromise on either stance stood in the way of the tradition’s survival, as will be shown in an example of *salawat dulang tuo* (“old” *salawat dulang*) from Maninjau. *Salawat dulang*’s strength in both Islamic content and improvisation present a unique opportunity to understand this art form as a channel

²⁶⁸ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 9.

through which local Islamic history and Islamic identity are embodied, experienced, and interpreted through performance, and how these intersectional identities facilitate multifaceted global and local belongingness.

II. TAREKAT SYATTARIYAH AND *SALAWAT DULANG* AS MINANG ISLAMIC ORAL TRADITION

When Rustam Sinaro Baso and his wife finally arrived in Mecca in 2015 for the Hajj, they had waited on a government waitlist for three years.²⁶⁹ A *tukang salawat dulang* (practitioner of *salawat dulang*), Haji Rustam (the title Rustam now goes by after returning from the Hajj) was a traditional artisan who has studied and performed *salawat dulang* since he was in primary school in the late 1930s and 1940s. He was the eldest *tukang salawat dulang* known amongst my teachers who was still living in Indonesia at the time of my research (b. 1930 in Balimbing, in today's West Sumatra).²⁷⁰ His reputation as a performer followed him to Mecca – others from Indonesia who took the journey with him were curious to hear his voice, and Rustam was happy to indulge them. Grabbing a plastic tray typically used to carry water glasses (*nampan air*), Rustam sat cross-legged and propped the tray on the arch of his right foot. Rocking side to side and tapping the center of the tray with his right hand and the rim with his left, Rustam sang about the life of Prophet Muhammad and lessons from the Qur'an. *Sejarahnya betul yang saya bawakan disana* (“The history that I presented there was true history”), he told me as we sat together on his porch in Balimbing sipping sweetened tea. Rustam's pride in this moment was evident. Not only was Rustam skilled in a vocal tradition to share essential stories about Islam and the Prophet, but he was also accepted as an authority figure amongst Indonesians in the very birthplace of Islam. There

²⁶⁹ The Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages are coordinated through Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs, and a three-year wait is considered quite short for many Indonesians seeking to perform the Hajj. In Rustam's case, priority was granted to the elderly.

²⁷⁰ Haji Rustam passed away in 2022 at 92 years old.

was a tone of validation in Rustam's voice when he told this story and described his role as an *ustad* for the Indonesian Muslim community on Hajj.

This version of *salawat dulang*, one that is improvised on the fly by a single individual using whatever tool is available as percussion, is quite distinct from *salawat dulang* nowadays that is performed by groups of two invited to play at special events (though it bears striking similarity to how ISI-Padangpanjang undergraduates scramble to find any means possible to practice their drumming – using trays, notebooks, their body, etc. in lieu of *dulang*). Though formalized *salawat dulang* greatly values the *dulang* instrument on its own, the flexibility of instrument holds a special place in the tradition's history. What Rustam experienced in Mecca – an eager audience who was content with Rustam's quick resort to a plastic tray accompaniment – draws upon *salawat dulang*'s origins as spontaneous *dakwah* – Islamic proselytization.

Minang oral histories trace the development of *salawat dulang* to the teachings of Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh, a Sufi spiritual teacher of tarekat Syattariyah (an order of Sufism)²⁷¹ from the Minangkabau highlands and a man believed to have lived for 200 years (b. 1730, d. 1930).²⁷² *Tuanku* is a title granted to high-ranking *ulama* in Minangkabau society and culture. My teacher Firdaus, among others, believes that after a traditional shared meal one day (called *makan bajamba* in Minang), Tuanku Limapuluh took the central metal platter, now empty of its rice and *gulai* (curry), and placed it atop his foot as he sat cross-legged amongst his students. The clean bottom of the tray facing outward, Tuanku Limapuluh began to tap the tray to accompany his songs about the Pillars of Islam and lessons from the Qur'an. This level of spontaneity and the innovative use

²⁷¹ *Tarekat* in Indonesian comes from the Arabic word *tariqa*, meaning a Sufi order or school. In Bahasa Indonesia, *tarekat* is often translated as *aliran*, meaning "stream" or "current."

²⁷² This claim – that *salawat dulang* may be traced to the Syattariyah teacher Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh – was expressed to me by my teacher Firdaus and reiterated orally in our conversations with Haji Rustam. Eka Meigalia, a scholar at Andalas University in Padang, cites Firdaus for this information in her book, *Mengenal Tradisi Lisan Minangkabau: Salawat Dulang*, which was just published when I met her in 2019.

of something as quotidian as a food tray make *salawat dulang* a unique artistic tradition. While performers today perform in duets with base texts, they aspire to keep the spirit of spontaneity alive in their performance through *syairs* composed on the spot and their direct interaction with the audience. The spontaneity that was so important to the form's beginnings remains equally important today, and it is this feature that facilitates the form's continuous development in response to changing surroundings. And in the case of Haji Rustam, his experience and competence in both *salawat dulang* and in Islamic instruction was immediately apparent in the ease with which he found an unexpected and unrehearsed solution, a plastic tray and his voice, much in the tradition of Tuanku Limapuluh himself.

Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh lies to rest in a mausoleum in Nagari Guguk Malalo, Tanah Datar Regency. Hugging the northern boundary of Lake Singkarak, one of Sumatra's impressive lakes that empties via the Ombilin and Anai rivers which laterally transect the island, Tanah Datar is best known for its historical association with the kingdom of Pagaruyung and its palace location (reconstructed today near the city of Batusangkar). To visit the gravesite, I hopped into Firdaus' shiny black Jeep along with Nita, another student of Firdaus and a friend of mine. Driving 30 kilometers to the south of Padangpanjang along the western edge of Lake Singkarak, we then turned west about halfway down the lake's shore to climb into the hills. As we approached Guguk Malalo, the roads became narrow and windy; without clear signage, I was surprised when we suddenly stopped at the base of a rocky flight of stairs, with a half-legible stone plaque indicating we had arrived at Makam Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh (figure 3.5). We began to climb – 75 steps, the memorial's guardian informed me when we reached the top – and I noticed the countless piles of *pensi* shells (a type of small clam from Lake Singkarak) lining the pathway, likely left behind by children snacking along their journey up. This region of Sumatra straddles the Earth's equator,

and as we climbed I was grateful for the soft breeze following us from Lake Singkarak below, finally cooling us down as the trees began to thin around us.



Figure 3.5: Plaque indicating the mausoleum of Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh.

Source: Katia Chaterji

At the top, we entered a circular tomb constructed of wood with plenty of glass windows to allow the light from the outdoors to illuminate the inside. Tuanku Limapuluh rests in the middle of the inner sanctum and is surrounded by two other tombs, presumably also of Syattariyah leaders. Sand, rocks, and giant fluted clam shells fill the top depression of the tomb, left behind by pilgrims seeking blessings.²⁷³ The site's guardian tells us that approximately 30,000 pilgrims each year visit Limapuluh's grave, often staying to pray or meditate through the night. Many of them come during the month of Safar, the second month in the Islamic lunar calendar and a particularly auspicious month to perform *ziara makam*, pilgrimage to the gravesites of spiritual teachers and saints. Visitors usually have some connection to Tuanku Limapuluh, typically some relationship to the historical figure himself.²⁷⁴ Firdaus, for one, not only holds a deep connection to Limapuluh as the symbol of *salawat dulang*'s beginnings, but he also was instructed at *pesantren* in Malalo by the grandson of Tuanku himself. Firdaus thus considers himself to be three generations removed from this prestigious figure, and this connection fortifies his own *salawat dulang* practice.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Such large clam shells, from the Fluted Clam or the Giant Gigas Clam, are very commonly left behind by pilgrims at other graves associated with Tarekat Syattariyah, and are possibly suggestive of the long spiritual journeys these teachers undertook when they were alive.

²⁷⁴ According to the guardian on site that day, most visitors come from West Sumatra, Jambi, Riau, Palembang, and Bandung.

²⁷⁵ Firdaus first studied *salawat dulang* when he was in primary school and *pesantren* in Malalo. He began to take classes with Haji Rustam and remained in contact with him as he grew older, pursued his undergraduate and

While Tuanku Limapuluh is attributed with early *salawat dulang* development, his life was significantly influenced by the emergence of a new Islamic learning environment created by notable figures that came before him. Some scholars have traced Islam's arrival in Minangkabau to the 16th century, but there is one prominent figure from the 17th century who is widely recognized as shifting the tide of western Sumatra's Islamization, Syekh Burhanuddin Ulakan Pariaman (d. 1704).²⁷⁶ Burhanuddin studied Islam in Aceh under the well-known Syattariyah *mufti* Syekh Abdurrauf al-Sinkili before he was granted permission to return to his homeland on coastal Minangkabau lands to build an Islamic school (*surau*) in Tanjung Medan Ulakan and to teach Islam locally. His gravesite and the site of his *surau* in today's Pariaman, 60 kilometers north of Padang along the coast, are popular amongst pilgrims especially during the month of Safar.²⁷⁷ Such pilgrimages are coined *basapa*, a portmanteau of *bersafar bersempar*, meaning to go on pilgrimage during the month of Safar along with tens of thousands of other people. Burhanuddin's role in exposing the Minang people to Islam in a relatable way is deeply recognized today, and it was this Islamic cultural environment that Burhanuddin fostered that laid the grounds for Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh's spiritual pathway and his eventual contribution to the *salawat dulang* performance tradition.

A credible chain of transmission is a foundational value within Islamic knowledge. *Hadith* literature, the collection of stories about Prophet Muhammad during His lifetime that Muslims may look towards for spiritual guidance, is predicated upon the existence of a verified chain of

graduate degrees in Surakarta, Java, and eventually returned to West Sumatra to begin playing *salawat dulang* in earnest.

²⁷⁶ See Jeffrey Hadler, *Muslims and Matriarchs Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 19.

²⁷⁷ This pilgrimage has taken place since at least 1918 when it was noted in Volume 3 of the Dutch *Encyclopaedie* as attracting tens of thousands of pilgrims to Pariaman each year. See: Graff and Stibbe, *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsche-Indie*, 343.

transmission, or *silsilah*, indicating the trustworthy transference of oral information that traces back to the time of the Prophet's own life. The Qur'an, also, represents an oral tradition of God's words heard and then recited – the written text is secondary in purity. The significance placed upon orality within Islam, as discussed in Chapter Two, is engrained into the very traditions that form its core: the Qur'an, hadith, and the sunnah.

Salawat dulang, too, engages in this long tradition of orality, not only in its voiced content but also in its lineage, its own *silsilah*. Tarekat Syattariyah, like other Sufi schools such as Naqshbandiyah, Qadiri, Rifa'iyah, etc., is constructed as a hierarchical network of teachers who grant permission to select pupils to spread the teachings of their tarekat in new places – to act as their teacher's *khalifa*. The chain of authority for Sufi tarekat knowledge links an individual practitioner to their illustrious predecessors, and this spiritual genealogy makes a claim of historical continuity that is recognized and respected by other Sufis.²⁷⁸ As was revealed to me by self-identified Syattariyah initiates I met in the field, the oral histories of the Syattariyah order recognize the 15th century teacher Abdullah Shattar as its founder.²⁷⁹ Many believe that Shattar's individual spiritual lineage traces back to Bayazid Bistami, a Persian Sufi living in the 9th century who is named in the *silsilah* of the older Naqshbandiyah order.²⁸⁰ Shattar, who originated from South Asia but later established himself around the Middle East, developed his own method of transmission based on the Arabic meaning of his name, "lightning." His rapid technique represents a unique teaching method that results in swift "completion": a teacher elevates a student from the first station of Sufi learning (*shariyat*) to the second (*tariqat*) in one sitting, after which the teacher

²⁷⁸ Martin van Bruinessen, "Shari'a Court, Tarekat and Pesantren: Religious Institutions in the Banten Sultanate," *Archipel* 50, no. 1 (1995): 165–99.

²⁷⁹ Named after Abdullah Shattar, this eponymous brotherhood goes by various spellings including Shattari, Shattariyah, and Syattariyah. The latter is the most common spelling in Indonesian.

²⁸⁰ Scholars such as Idries Shah write that the Shattari order emerged from the Naqshbandi order, and various crossovers between the two exist in practice. Bistami himself was known for his "ecstatic utterances."

carefully guides the student through the final two advanced Sufi stages of *haqiqa* (mystical truth) and *marifa* (final mystical knowledge).²⁸¹ Indonesians who identify with the Syattariyah order translate the meaning of their order as *cepat*, “fast,” reflecting this unique method from the order’s founder, and this symbolism of swiftness carries through into the traditional arts.²⁸² Haji Rustam, the *salawat dulang* elder who entertained his peers in Mecca using a plastic tray, named his *salawat dulang* group “Gas Baracun” (“poison gas”), explaining his logic to be named after this substance because it is quick to spread and take effect. In their performances, Gas Baracun’s nominal association with speed was a reflection not only of their skill in generating spontaneous *syairs* in response to difficult theological questions but also of their legacy as Syattariyah initiates who successfully completed their spiritual training via Shattar’s method.

As Tarekat Syattariyah grew in prominence around the Middle East, prospective disciples made extensive journeys across the growing Muslim world to meet Syattari leaders and begin their training. One such traveler was Abdurrauf al-Sinkili from Sumatra’s northern Acehese coast. Arriving in Medina in the middle of the 17th century (c. 1642), al-Sinkili sought out two leaders of the order, Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1689 CE) and Ahmad al-Qushashi (d. 1661 CE). After two decades studying in the birthplace of Islam, al-Sinkili was authorized by his teachers to introduce the Syattariyah path to those in his homeland of Aceh.²⁸³ He is believed to have returned to Aceh around 1661 CE, where he promptly opened an Islamic school along the Aceh River. Al-Sinkili, via his school in Aceh, is recognized as the first individual to introduce Tarekat Syattariyah to the

²⁸¹ Shah, *The Sufis*.

²⁸² Interview with Firdaus, interview by Katia Chaterji, May 22, 2019; Interview with Jon Erizal (Cakra), interview by Katia Chaterji, November 27, 2019.

²⁸³ Desy Aryanti, “Surau Syekh Burhanuddin Ulakan and Islamization of Minangkabau,” *Diaspora Minang*, 2014, 1–11.

lands “below the winds,”²⁸⁴ and his journey in the Middle East studying under scholars the likes of al-Kurani and al-Qushashi legitimized his authority as a spiritual teacher back in his homeland. Al-Sinkili’s reputation as Islamic leader, combined with Aceh’s unique geographical position at the cusp of the nautically invaluable Straits of Melaka, firmly position Aceh on the geographical map and within the collective memory of Islamization in Southeast Asia.

Burhanuddin Ulakan Pariaman, discussed above, was one of al-Sinkili’s many students, and perhaps his most well-known student in Sumatra. Like al-Sinkili, Burhanuddin too traveled far away from home to study Islam with a renowned teacher of the Syattariyah order.²⁸⁵ At this time in the 17th century, western Sumatra’s coast was transitioning from operating under subordination of the governing sultanate in Aceh to being re-incorporated into the Minangkabau Kingdom governed from Pagaruyung in the highlands. Burhanuddin likely returned to his homeland at a moment when locals were celebrating their newfound independence. While many during this time might have rejected an affinity towards Aceh due to ongoing social and political conflict, Burhanuddin maintained a close connection to Aceh on Islamic terms. Tarekat Syattariyah’s *silsilah* preserves the teacher-disciple relationship, and it was the tarekat’s chain of transmission to al-Sinkili in Aceh (and through him, to al-Kurani, al-Qushashi, and eventually all the way to Abdullah Shattar himself) that granted locals like Burhanuddin the religious authority to gain respect and operate in Minangkabau.

Burhanuddin also physically drew Minangkabau and Aceh together through the natural environment. Stories circulate that Burhanuddin brought seeds of the *pinang biru* tree on the boat with him when he returned from Aceh, and that he planted these seeds along the coast near

²⁸⁴ Referring to the monsoon wind cycles across the Indian Ocean, the “lands below the winds” indicates the region of Southeast Asia. It is contrasted with the “lands above the winds,” meaning the western Indian Ocean world.

²⁸⁵ Duski Samad, *Syekh Burhanuddin Dan Islamisasi Minangkabau (Syarak Mandaki Adat Manurun)* (Jakarta: The Minangkabau Foundation (Yayasan Pengembangan Ekonomi dan Kesejahteraan Masyarakat), 2002).

Pariaman. Upon Burhanuddin's death in 1704 CE, and at his request, he was buried next to these young trees. *Pinang biru* trees still stand around Burhanuddin's grave today, and these trees have assimilated into the Minangkabau geophysical landscape, a tangible symbol of Aceh's prominent relationship to western Sumatra in the *silsilah* of local Islam.

Syekh Burhanuddin, as the Sufi *murshid* is called posthumously, is deeply respected for introducing Islam to western Sumatra through his Syattariyah school in Pariaman. His school, commonly known as Surau Gadang Syekh Burhanuddin, was the first religious institution in the Minangkabau region. Due to its significance in local Islamization and its tiered timber architectural style, it is often compared to the legendary mosque in Java at Demak that similarly claims Sufi ancestral origins through Sunan Kalijaga, one of the nine Javanese saints of Islam, the *Wali Songo*. There are some who liken Burhanuddin himself to the *Wali Songo* because of his influence on Islamic culture and knowledge in Minangkabau. The prime position of the *surau* as Islamic learning center in Minangkabau law and society is often cited as evidence of Burhanuddin's lasting success in the region. If anything, the close association between Islam and Minang identity today reflects the belief that Burhanuddin's lifework contributed to the historical process of Islamization on local Minang terms, paving a path towards the necessarily cojoined identity markers of Minang and Muslim.²⁸⁶

Many of Burhanuddin's own students traveled and brought his teachings elsewhere, including up into the Minangkabau interior. It was from within this mobile Islamic learning culture that the highlander Jinang Tuanku Limapuluh began his own journey along the Syattariyah path, leading to his famed use of a *dulang* food platter as percussion to accompany sung verse. As *salawat dulang* developed as a traditional musical form, it remained a significant means for

²⁸⁶ Samad.

dakwah, for sharing information about Islam and Islamic practice while entertaining its listeners through rhythm and voice.²⁸⁷ This role has significant cultural impact. It positions *salawat dulang* as an Islamic art form, one that is authentic to Minang histories and understandings of Islam. It also promotes *salawat dulang* practitioners as religious authorities themselves, musicians who are entrusted with Qur’anic knowledge and who utilize the embodied practice of meditative singing and drumming to communicate that knowledge to others. For this cultural significance to remain in effect, *salawat dulang* must situate itself within a credible chain of transmissible Islamic knowledge. It is on this issue that the *silsilah* of tarekat Syattariyah remains critical to the justification of *salawat dulang* as an “authentic” Islamic art form. That *salawat dulang* claims such an essential connection to tarekat Syattariyah, a spiritual chain that links its practitioners to Burhanuddin and, through him, to al-Sinkili, al-Kurani, al-Qushashi, and eventually to Abdullah Shattar himself, suggests that this art form is practiced and witnessed in Minang contexts as an embodiment of localized Syattariyah teachings. The spiritual genealogy of tarekat Syattariyah, and *salawat dulang*’s place within it, positions *salawat dulang* as a legitimate source of Islamic knowledge. This kind of process is not unique to *salawat dulang*; other performance traditions are enveloped within the worldview of different tarekats, such as *zikir rebano* within the context of tarekat Naqshbandiyah also in western Sumatra.

The stories that surround *salawat dulang* bring into focus the importance of oral history and of oral tradition as valuable historical material. The oral history of *salawat dulang* reflects how the tradition and its origins are remembered by elders and practitioners today, and how this active memory of *salawat dulang*’s history is re/produced through its continued performance. *Salawat dulang* as oral tradition encapsulates the oral messages embedded within and

²⁸⁷ Eka Meigalia, *Mengenal Tradisi Lisan Minangkabau: Salawat Dulang* (Padang: LPPM Universitas Andalas, 2019).

communicated through the process of performance.²⁸⁸ These verbal messages, those that are sung and called out with the aid of a drum, are valuable sources of history because they shed light on the conscious selection of memory as *salawat dulang* material has passed down over generations.²⁸⁹ And practitioners take on active roles in negotiating *salawat dulang*'s oral history and its oral tradition. In locating a spiritual Islamic connection in the teachings of tarekat Syattariyah, *salawat dulang* practitioners at once substantiate the long history of Islam along Sumatra's coasts from Aceh to West Sumatra, establish a credible Islamic lineage, and position themselves as spiritual guides in the pursuit of Islamic knowledge. Historians may look towards *salawat dulang* for a refreshed understanding of the Minangkabau past and its imagined futures.

The following section details *salawat dulang*'s five-part composition and discusses in what ways the underlying Syattariyah message – that above all Allah and the Prophet Muhammad cannot be separated – is visible in this material. This description is followed by a discussion of changes to the form under the New Order as experienced by my interlocutors and the strategic decisions that practitioners made, and continue to make, to ensure *salawat dulang*'s continued survival as an Islamic performing arts form.

III. COMPOSITION, STRUCTURE, AND STYLE

Singing is not my forte – my natural inclination is towards body movement arts. So I was resistant, to say the least, when an overwhelming majority of campus administrators and instructors insisted I begin studying *salawat dulang* with Pak Firdaus. But to them, hearing my expressed interest in studying the Islamic performing arts, there was no question whether to consider *salawat*

²⁸⁸ Meigalia.

²⁸⁹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 27.

dulang or not. *Salawat dulang* is often described as an “explicitly Muslim form of singing,”²⁹⁰ one that is found exclusively among the Minangkabau in West Sumatra and wherever Minang communities *merantau*.²⁹¹ My curiosity was piqued as it became clearer to me that this art form, which is not widely known outside of Minang contexts, was intimately attached to local Islamic identity.

My first meeting with Firdaus took the form of an hour-long lecture on a projector detailing the component parts of *salawat dulang* in theory and practice. This introduction, paired with my preexisting passivity towards singing styles, was overwhelming at first. Sitting in on *salawat dulang* undergraduate classes, I noticed students suppressing yawns as they struggled to stay awake at 8 o’clock each morning, likely due to a combination of all-night student *nongkrong* sessions and the abstract material presented in class.²⁹² It took significant time spent with and around this art form before I understood what was taking place. *Salawat dulang* is an esoteric practice that requires theological curiosity and skill on the part of the artist. But when it is performed, the technicalities that may frustrate, confuse, or otherwise disinterest students diminish in the face of the performers’ magnetism on stage. This makes it difficult to bring *salawat dulang* into an academic environment – its structure and style truly depend upon the space and place of its live performance. In a sense, *salawat dulang* is a successful form of artistic communication precisely because of the effect it has on those in the audience.

My body came to understand what I was seeing in *salawat dulang* only once I began to play one-on-one with Firdaus. Brazenly pushing my sensitivities about my voice aside, I

²⁹⁰ *Gongs and Vocal Music from Sumatra: Talempong, Didong, Kulintang, Salawat Dulang*, vol. 12, Smithsonian Folkways Music of Indonesia, 1996, 13, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

²⁹¹ Literally translated as “to wander,” *merantau* refers to the tradition of Minang male youth traveling away from their homeland to make a living before returning to *alam Minangkabau* for marriage.

²⁹² *Nongkrong* is slang for casual meetings with friends to talk, smoke, and chill out.

committed myself to drumming. After each session, my feet would be asleep and the arch of my right foot where the *dulang* sat would bear a red mark for at least the rest of the day. The palm of my right hand would be tender from the continuous skin-to-brass contact, and my left wrist would be stiff from shifting between balancing the *dulang* upright and tilting my wrist forward to tap the rim with my fingers. Placing my body in connection with the *dulang* impressed upon me the depth of endurance and focus needed to make the playing look simple – and painless.

Salawat dulang performances are lengthy. Performed as a duet, an evening of *salawat dulang* today typically features two pairs, or groups, who perform back-to-back in a light-hearted battle.²⁹³ Each pair must satisfy five sections in order to complete a single *salawat dulang* set, called *tanggak*. A *tanggak* lasts anywhere between twenty minutes to one hour in duration, depending on the length of each of these five component parts. A recorded *tanggak salawat dulang* for the Smithsonian Folkways project, for example, ran just under 23 minutes.²⁹⁴ During my personal observations, however, the shortest *tanggak* I witnessed was 45 minutes, with the average set lasting closer to one hour. In a performance, the two groups take turns to perform four or five *tanggak* each, lasting between 4-7 hours in length.²⁹⁵ These performances begin late in the evening, around 10pm after the Isha prayers, and continue until the Fajr prayers at dawn. Performers must have incredible stamina to endure not only the length of each individual *tanggak* (performing in a fixed seated position with little movement for an hour) but also the length of the entire evening (performing at least two full sets, but typically more, with coffee and cigarette breaks in between

²⁹³ Traditionally, *salawat dulang* was performed exclusively by men inside or within the vicinity of a mosque or *surau*. Restrictions prohibiting women from public displays or performance means that *salawat dulang* evolved as a predominantly masculine style. As genres opened up to new voices from the 1970s onward, some female vocalists have chosen to specialize in *salawat dulang*, but female groups are far less common.

²⁹⁴ *Gongs and Vocal Music from Sumatra: Talempong, Didong, Kulintang, Salawat Dulang*.

²⁹⁵ The number of *tanggak* and the overall length of a night's performance vary greatly in response to how engaged the audience is and the purpose of the event itself, i.e. wedding, Quranic recitation celebration, community fundraising gathering, etc.

while the other group performs). Observing *salawat dulang* practitioners complete an evening of performance is a lesson in humility – feeling the stiff aches in my body after just one hour practicing with Firdaus, I am overwhelmed with awe each time I watch these musicians perform for hours on end.

There are several aspects that grant *salawat dulang* its label within Indonesian arts discourse as *kesesian islami* (Islamic arts, or arts with a Muslim theme). For Margaret Kartomi, the influential ethnomusicologist who conducted extensive research in Sumatra in the 1970s and 1980s, the “Muslim sound” she identifies comes from instrumentation, and specifically the use of the frame drum, widely considered the quintessential Islamic drum. Frame drums typically have an animal skin head pinned to a circular wooden frame, and musicians produce three primary pitch-timbres that correlate to the playing of certain parts of the drum: *tum*, *tak*, and *darap*. In *salawat dulang*, the use of the brass *dulang* mirrors that of the frame drum. As Debi and Shinty demonstrated in the opening, practitioners sit cross-legged on the floor or on a cushion with the *dulang* resting atop the arch of the right foot. They play the *dulang* as a drum, hitting the center (*dum*), the rim (*tak*), with embellishments of finger flourishes (*darap*).

Beyond this instrumentation, *salawat dulang*’s compositional structure locates the form within the realm of the Islamic arts because its format and content are embedded with Islamic meaning. *Salawat dulang* follows a prescribed formula. There are five sections that the duo must perform to satisfactorily complete a set. Several practitioners I met referred to these five sections as *lagu*, or songs, because they each follow a unique melody with variable rhythmic composition. These five sections include the *khutbah* (opening), *lagu batang*, *yamolai*, *lagu cancang*, and *penutup* (closing). Both the *khutbah* and *penutup* contain Islamic prayers, whereas the three inner sections focus on the Pillars of Islam and lessons from the Qur’an and hadith as well as addressing

topical questions relevant to the community. Assumed body positions during these five sections, modeled in part by Debi and Shinty at the opening, indicate that beyond its words alone, *salawat dulang* reflects clear Sufi attributes. *Pengajian tubuh*, or the Sufi belief that the physical body reflects the spiritual body (*roh; batin*), becomes a means through which performers embody *tawhid* (Oneness of God) and achieve a state of focused meditation to remember and construct *syairs* in performance.

Some scholarship suggests that *salawat dulang*, like other Minang Islamic arts such as *tari indang*, have agricultural origins, a belief that corresponds to the close association between other traditional Minang arts with the land and the harvest, as may be observed in *tari piring* (also known as *tari lilin*) and *saluang dendang*.²⁹⁶ This correlation may be because the *salawat dulang* “texts” used in the 1970s, the first instance when *salawat dulang* appeared in English-language scholarship, were secular and topical; any Islamic content or Muslim phrases, like *Bismillah*, were inserted at the beginning and end of some sections only.²⁹⁷ But this understanding of *salawat dulang* as superficially Islamic – as a traditional art form that gestures to Islam through a few phrases but not much beyond that – contrasts with the oral history of the art form propagated by local elders and practitioners, those who trace the origins of *salawat dulang* to the role of tarekat Syattariyah in introducing and localizing Islam in Minangkabau lands. Such an association would indicate that *salawat dulang*, regardless of the precise words sung, was integral to the changing cultural environment in western Sumatra to embrace Islam. Its precise origin story may never be known; moreover, such emphasis on exact origins is unproductive. As an oral tradition, *salawat*

²⁹⁶ Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra*, 2012, 98.

²⁹⁷ When Firdaus returned to West Sumatra after living and studying in Java for many years, he began to teach *salawat dulang* at ISI-Padangpanjang, teaching the very first *salawat dulang* classes to be offered on campus. It was at this time when he decided to write down the texts he used in performance, texts that are traditionally passed down orally only. Firdaus considers himself to be the first to write down *teks salawat dulang* for his pedagogical purposes, and in my fieldwork I did not encounter written and distributed texts aside from his.

dulang possesses an inherent flexibility that guarantees its adaptability to maintain relevance and communicate new ideas, all the while appealing to a wide audience. Changes in the sung “text,” from its inception to its documentation in the 1970s until now, is an inherent part of this built-in flexibility and as such, body texts will reflect social conditions at moments of transition.

To this end, it is meaningful to look deeper into the five *lagu* that comprise a *tanggak salawat dulang* in order to understand some of the possibilities available to practitioners to insert Islamic stories and meaning into their songs in the hope that their knowledge will both aid and entertain the community. As discussed above, Islamic-ness is reinforced through the use of instrument (one that is functionally related to the frame drum), vocal quality (meditative and long undulating tones reminiscent of Sufi chants), body positioning (steady stance with significant hand gestures), and its oral history of origin. Below, the vocalized words themselves will be discussed as an additional arena for *salawat dulang*'s Islamic nature that contributes to the transmission of spiritual knowledge in local context.

Khutbah

The *khutbah* is a purely vocal invocation to God that opens each *tanggak salawat dulang*. Easily recognizable as the vocal opening section, the *khutbah* typically repeats phrases that invoke God, such as *Nabi Allah ya Nabi ya junjungan* (“The Esteemed Prophet of Allah”), *Allah-Allah*, and the profession of faith in Arabic, *Asyhadualailahailallah Waasyhaduanna Muhammadar rasulullah* (“There is no god but God and Muhammad is His prophet”). The profession of faith and *tawhid* – the *syahadat* or *shahadah* – is often described as the gateway into Islam, and it is traditionally recited in Sufi *dhikr* ceremonies as well as during a practicing Muslim’s daily prayers. In a *salawat dulang khutbah*, listeners are immediately surrounded by the familiar sounds of the

syahadat as they experience the rhythmic synergy of repetition that is closely aligned with Sufi *dhikr*.

The meaning of the *syahadat* in the *khutbah* is reinforced by certain embodiments on the part of the performer. As witnessed in Debi and Shinty's incantation of the *khutbah* during their class exam, the expression of the Oneness of God is visible in the player's hands. Holding the *dulang* still, players form a loose fist with their left hand with thumb and index finger touching. The soft contact between the pads of the thumb and index finger serves as a reminder of the inseparability of God and His prophet. Firdaus often used the description of a string connecting God and Muhammad, saying "*dimana ada Muhammad disitu ada Tuhan Allah*" ("wherever there is Muhammad, there is God/Allah"). In practice, this inseparability is reflected in the joining of two fingers, felt in the performers' own fingers and modeled for the audience to see.

Appendages are often utilized to signal specific Islamic symbols or meaning. The index finger alone, if pointed up towards the heavens, is often understood as a symbol of *tawhid*. In many Sufi musical genres, this symbol is invoked by the players and audience alike, accompanied by shouts of *Subhanallah* ("God is perfect") to praise God's beauty as reflected in the music. The five fingers are also sometimes used to describe the five pillars of Islam (*rukun*). As the fingers and their functions are connected to one another as part of a whole hand, so too are the five commandments that structure Muslim society. Firdaus often performs the following *syairs* discussing how the five pillars are anthropomorphized as five fingers:²⁹⁸

Assalamualaikum kasidang basamo
Adapun tangan satiok kito
Nan banyak batamu nan galib basuo
Adapun jari banyaknyo limo
Limo buah hukum nan wajib dek kito
Partamo syiahadat sumbayang kaduo
Katigo bazakat kaampepek puasoo

Peace be upon you, my brothers and sisters
As for our hands
Which often meet and greet
As for the number of fingers, there are five
Five obligatory duties for us to fulfill

²⁹⁸ I am grateful to Pak Firdaus for translating the Minang into Bahasa Indonesia and to Ika Hutami for assisting me in translating into English the *syairs* included in this chapter.

Kalimo naiak haji ateh kuaso
Itulah sababnyo jari dek limo

Jari nan limo yaikiwani
Kalau hikmahnyo kadalam nigari
Partamo banamo siampu jari
Samisa rang tuo dalam nigari
Katampek batanyo patang jo pagi
Kaduo tunjuak namonyo jari
Samisa rang cadaiak pandai dalam nagari
Kauntuak panunjuak itu dan ini
Katigo banamo sijari mati
Dari pado kawan tagak tatinggi
Samisa rang bagak dalam nigari
Umpamo tantara dengan polisi
Kaampek banamo sijari manih
Samisa rang kayo dalam nigari
Kasalang tenggang dek urang nigari
Kauntuak palakekkan intan jo podi
Kalimo kalingkiang nan ketek sakali
Samisa rakyat didalam nigari

Nan balimo itu kok indak sapakat
Apo-apo karajo ndak kamungkin Selamat
Apo-apo dijinjiang ndak kasamo barek
Kadalam nigari pulo baitu
Nan balimo itu kok indak sapadu
Apo-apo karajo ndak kamungkin maju
Saorang malo saorang maaju
Basalisih paham alim jo pengulu
Urangan lain ditangkok ragu
Antah kasinan antah kasitu

First is the *syahadat*²⁹⁹, second is *salah* (daily prayers)
Third is *zakat*³⁰⁰, fourth is fasting
Fifth is pilgrimage if able
That's why fingers are five

Oh, my brothers, there are five fingers
If their wisdom is brought into the country (*nagari*³⁰¹)
The first is called the mother finger
Like an elder in the country
The place to ask in the night and day
The second is called the index finger
Like a smart person in the country
To point out this and that
The third is called the dead (middle) finger
From a brave friend who stands tall
Like the military or the police in the country

The fourth is called the sweet (ring) finger
Like a wealthy person in the country

To wear diamonds and gold (*intan jo podi*³⁰²)
The fifth is the little pinky finger
Like the common people in the country

The five fingers, if they don't agree
Any work will not be trouble-free
Any load not equally easy
It's the same inside the country
The five fingers, if they don't cooperate
Any work will not progress
One pulls while one pushes
Disagreements between the learned and leaders
Others become doubtful
Going here and there, uncertain

Lagu Batang and Yamolai

²⁹⁹ The Islamic declaration of faith, affirming belief in the oneness of God and prophethood of Muhammad. Also spelled *shahada* or *shahadah*.

³⁰⁰ *Zakat* is an Islamic obligation, a form of almsgiving and religious tax, that every financially-able Muslim is required to give to support the needy and the poor. The word *zakat* means "purification" or "growth" in Arabic, and giving *zakat* is considered a way of purifying one's wealth and growing spiritually.

³⁰¹ *Nagari* is a term in the Minangkabau language which refers to a type of administrative division or local government unit in West Sumatra, Indonesia. It comes from the Sanskrit word "nagari," (negeri in Indonesian) which means 'land or realm,' and is different from another Sanskrit word, "nagara," (negara in Indonesian) which means "city." However, to give a wider context of the translation, it has been translated into country. Thanks to Ika Hutami for her assistance in this translation.

³⁰² "Intan jo podi" can be translated to "diamond with dirt" in English. The phrase is often used as an idiom to describe someone who appears outwardly beautiful or impressive, but has negative qualities or character flaws that are not immediately apparent. It suggests that while someone may be beautiful like a diamond, they may also have some negative qualities or hidden "dirt" like flaws, weaknesses, or negative traits.

As the *khutbah* is purely vocal, the transition into *lagu batang* is quite clear because it is accompanied by the first slow taps on the *dulang*. The vocals increase the tone intervals (more variation than in the *khutbah*), following Minang *syairs* or other rhymes that thematically connect with the *khutbah* that precedes it. This means that the performers continue their discussion of whatever topic they began in the opening; for example, discussion of the *syahadat* may be continued in the *lagu batang* to include standard, but specific, reminders of certain actions within the Islamic faith, like reciting *laa ilaha illallah* (declaration of faith) before death.

The *lagu batang* is notable because the two performers explicitly ask permission from Allah and from the audience to perform. It is here that the performers acknowledge who invited them to perform and who might be in their audience. Firdaus describes this section as “swinging vocals” (berupa alunan vokal) with a variety of melodies sung by the *tukang salawat dulang* while tapping intricate rhythms on the *dulang* characterized as beautiful, rhythmic, dynamic, and sacred.³⁰³ The vocals (*imbauan lagu batang*) always begin with the words “O Allah ei yaallah Allah illah denan lai ya iiLallah iyo diya Allah iyo delai Tuhanku. Urabbi iyo Muhammad nitu delai urang di Makah” (Allah Tuhanku Robbi Muhammad itu orang di Mekah). This opening, more so than the *khutbah* perhaps, is used as a declaration of Allah’s Oneness and one’s surrender to God. This is essential because it is only through the grace and power of God that *tukang salawat dulang* are able (and allowed) to perform.

Below is an example of the lyrical workings possible in *lagu batang*:

Sabananyo Rasul kulfah Allah

Indeed, The Prophet (peace be upon him) is the caliph³⁰⁴ of Allah

³⁰³ Firdaus, “Aspek-Aspek Kajian Pendidikan Islami Dalam Seni Pertunjukkan Salawat Dulang,” Program Studi Seni Karawitan, Fakultas Seni Pertunjukan (Padangpanjang: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Padangpanjang, 2019).

³⁰⁴ “Khalifah” is an Arabic word that means “successor” or “steward.” In Islamic tradition, a khalifah refers to a leader or ruler who is responsible for upholding and enforcing the laws and teachings of Islam. The title of khalifah was first used in the early days of Islam to refer to the first four leaders of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. These leaders were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, and they are known as the

Iyo Allah lah badiri dengan sendirinyo
 Qiyamu binafsihi itulah sifatnyo
 Matilah kamu dalam kulimah
 Dalam kulimah Lailahailallah
 Salamaik jasmani ditarimo tanah
 Selamat rahani bapulang ka Allah
 Baitu pangajian dalam kulimah
 Dalam kulimah Lailahailallah

Allah stands alone
 ‘Qiyamubinafsihi’³⁰⁵ (standing alone) is His attribute
 Die in the utterance
 In the utterance 'Lailahailallah'
 May your physical body be received by the earth in safety
 May your spirit return to Allah in safety
 Such is the study within the utterance
 In the utterance 'Lailahailallah'

Barakat sufaat dari junjungan kito
 Sarato qudarat Tuhan yang aso
 Lah dapek kami mangambang curito
 Mangambang curito dimuko basamo
 Sabalum kami mangambang curito
 Sabalun disabuik apo-apo sengajo
 Kami kabamohon kapinonton basamo
 Yo dari arjuna minang urang bari namo
 Ilallah...

By the blessing of the intercession of the Prophet (peace be upon him)
 And the power of the One Almighty God
 We can spread stories
 Spreading tales among us
 Before we start telling the stories
 Before we mention anything deliberately
 We humbly ask for your presence
 Oh, we are Arjuna Minang,³⁰⁶ humbly ask for your help
 Ilallah...

What this section does (this “text”) is it provides an explanation of the *kalimat tauhid*, the Oneness of God, and that Allah is characterized by “qiyamubinafsihi” (*Allah berdiri dengan sendirinya*) and Muhammad is His Prophet. It also serves as a reminder that Muslims must state the *kalimat tauhid* (the *syahadat*, “Lailahailallah”) before death to safely exit this world and protect their souls.

In *yamolai*, the performers begin to build up their rhythmic momentum, accentuated by the continued repetition of certain words and phrases akin to *dhikir*.

Lagu Cancang

The *lagu cancang* section of *salawat dulang* is the longest, and the most free-form of the five sections. Here, the lead of the duo sings the *isi* or the set-up of Minang *syairs*, while the

Rashidun or "Rightly Guided" caliphs. Since then, the title of khalifah has been used by various Muslim leaders throughout history, including the Ottoman sultans who ruled over a large part of the Muslim world for centuries.
³⁰⁵ "Qiyamubinafsihi" is an Arabic phrase that means "standing by oneself" or "standing alone." It is used to describe someone who is able to stand or take action independently, without needing the help or support of others.

³⁰⁶ Arjuna Minang is the name of Firdaus' *salawat dulang* group. The name Arjuna is actually quite uncommon in Minangkabau contexts and is a reflection of Firdaus' time in Surakarta when he was younger. See Figure 3.1.

follower of the duo provides the *buah*, or the answer/resolution to the *syair*. *Syairs* in this context are very similar to Malay *pantuns*. They are playful rhymes that experiment with linguistic colloquialisms and provide lessons in the form of short fables. The *lagu cancang* also includes a lengthy question and answer portion called *tanya-jawab*. Here, the performers pontificate on questions that the audience members had previously posed to them (typically facilitated by the event organizer), or they respond to challenging questions that the competing duo asked them in the previous *tanggak*.

Before the *lagu cancang* begins in earnest (before they begin providing the *isi* and *buah*), there is always an introductory song section to greet the guests, give *salam* greetings, and claim Islam as their own:

O sambuiklah salam dari kami baduo
Kaganti sirih dalam carano
Kaganti rokok timbakau lunto
Disoal pengajian kakami baco
Karano pangajian penting dek kito
Penting sakali dibidang agama
Agama Islam agama kito
Suruah jo tagah ado didlamnyo
Hutang dek kito manjalankan sajo

O, let us offer our regards from us both
In exchange for betel nut and areca nut
In exchange for tobacco from Lunto
We recite our religious teachings
Because our religious teachings are important
Important in the field of our religion
Our religion is Islam, it is our religion
It orders and prohibits us from within
Let's fulfill our obligations, that we owe and strive to fulfill them

This introductory section is almost always similar, and it serves to introduce the *isi* and *buah* of *salawat dulang* and also suggest the themes that will be discussed. The section serves the function of giving *salam* (*persembahan*) and an explanation of the importance of the message that will be shared.

The *lagu cancang* continues with a passage that Firdaus calls *teks buah*. This is a longer passage that tackles a variety of themes related to the history of Prophet Muhammad, Israk and Mikraj stories (Isra' and Mi'raj, the Night Journey marking the journey and ascent of the Prophet to heaven), matters of *solat*, *dzikir*, Muslim life, the Five Pillars of Islam, teachings of the body, as well as stories relevant to contemporary life. All themes incorporated into the *teks buah*, according

to each practitioner I met, must revolve around Islamic teachings, often associated with *tarekat* or mystical learning. This persistent incorporation of religious content throughout the *tanggak* (the *khutbah*, *lagu batang*, *yamolai*, *lagu cancang*, and later the *penutup*) contradicts Kartomi's observation from the 1970s that suggested superficial Islamic tones in the introduction and conclusion only of these performances. Firdaus' documentation of the "texts" used in performance, corroborated by the vibrant performances by various groups around West Sumatra, illustrate how Islam and Islamic meaning is critical to every component part of *salawat dulang* practice – at least as it is practiced and understood today.

Firdaus requires that his students memorize at least one *teks buah* (the longer portion within the *lagu cancang*) before they are permitted to hold the *dulang*. In doing so, he reinforces the belief that *dulang* in performance must go hand in hand with religious teaching, with *dakwah*. To attempt playing the *dulang* without understanding *teks buah* detracts from the intention and purpose of the art form itself. An example of a *teks buah*, one that discusses Creation, is as follows:

Mulo dibaco assalamualaikum	Let us start by reciting 'Assalamualaikum'
Dipulangkan sambah karapek nan umum	Returning greetings to everyone present
Jo hati barasiah dengan sinantum	Let the heart be purified with sincerity
Para karo nyawa kaji diujum	All will be accounted for in the afterlife
Nak dapek pidoman hiduik nak maklum	So that we may gain guidance and understanding
Asalnyo nyawa kakami baco	The original meaning of our life we recite,
Nak tantu tumuahnyo dimano bijo	Not knowing where its direction might be
Diasalnyo nyawa kok tidak nyato	Its origin is vague and unclear
Kok tidak tarang dimano asalnyo	Its source is unknown and uncertain
Lah nyato kito sirumik namo	But we are in harmony
Karanonyo nyawa ado dikito	For life is within us
Tapi tak tarang dimano asalnyo	Yet its origin is unknown
Diasalnyo nyawa kok tidak jail	Where does the soul come from if it's not clear
Kko tidak tarang asal dihati	If it's not clear, then it's in the heart
Percuma mambaco innalillahi	It is useless to read 'innalillah' ³⁰⁷
Kamudian itu wainna ilaihi	Then, we say 'wainna ilaihi'
Dengan roji, unna pulo sakali	With sincerity, or not at all

³⁰⁷ "Innalillahi wainna ilaihi raji'un" is an Arabic phrase commonly used by Muslims. It is usually said when someone has passed away or when a person receives bad news. The phrase translates to "Indeed, to God we belong and to God we shall return." It is a reminder of the temporary nature of life on earth and that all human beings will ultimately return to God after their time on earth is over.

Karano kato ndak ada arati

Because the words have no meaning

Sabab baitu handaklah kana
Nak kami sabuik asalnyo nyawa
Dalam A-qur'an ayatnyo ado
Ayat saratuiah tujuh pualuah duo
Disurek A.raf handaklah baco
Alastubirobbikun Tuhan mangato
Adapun takalo dahulu maso
Balun balangik babumi nangko
Balun basarugo balun banarako
A,ras dan kursyi balun lai ado
Malainkan Allah seorang sako
Badiri Allah dengan sendirinyo

Therefore, one should know this well
We shall mention the origin of life
In the Quran, there is a verse about it
Verse 172 in chapter seven
In Surah Al-A'raf, one should read
'Alastubirobbikun,'³⁰⁸ the word tells
As for the ancient time long ago
There was no grain of the universe
No earth nor heaven existed yet
No paradise, no hellfire set
No throne or chair was placed to sit
Only Allah alone did exist

Kun fayakun nan Tuhan ucap
Sebentar itu nur terkilat
Sudah terjadi nur Muhammad
Cemerlangnyo nur dihadapannyo zat
Dihadapan zat Tuhan yang hayat

"Kunfayakun"³⁰⁹ that God spoke
In a moment, the light shone
The light of Muhammad has appeared
Brilliant light before the essence
Before His very essence, the living God

Dimaso itu Tuhan bakato
Wahailah nur jawab sugir
Siapo nan Tuhan handaklah baco
Itulah kato Tuhan nan aso
Nur manjawab dengan sugiro
Lailahailallah bunyi bicaro
Itulah jawab nur nan cako

In that time, God spoke
"Let there be light," and it happened quickly
Whomsoever God wants
That is the word of the One and Only God
Nur (the light) replied swiftly
"La ilaha illallah" was the speech heard
That was the response of the shining light

Dimasonyo Nur mamandang Tuhan
Mukonyo merah larang bandingan
Karano dek malau basahlah badan
Basah dek paluah anggoto badan

At that time, Nur looked at God
His face was red, incomparable
Because of embarrassment, his body was wet
Wet with sweat all over his body

Tapi Tuhan bakuaso sungguah
Sagalo paluah kalua ditubuah
Yaitu aruah nyawa ditubuah

However, God truly has power
All sweat comes out of the body
Namely, the spirit of life in the body

Adapun sagalo alam laisa
Alamnyo halus suci dan jilah
Dikarando kaco tampek bermadah
Dikelilingi nur bahimpun sudah

This is the universe of all universes
Its realm is subtle, pure, and clear
Surrounded by glass ornamentation
And also surrounded by the gathering of Nur's light

Damaso itu bakato Tuhan
Kapadonyo Nur samo sakalian
Wahailah Nur handak dengarkan
Laiko aku Tuhan sakalian

At that time, God spoke
To Nur and everyone else present
"Listen, Nur," He said,
"And affirm Me, O All-Mighty Lord."

³⁰⁸ "Alastu bi Rabbikum" is a phrase in Arabic that appears in the Quran, which means "Am I not your Lord?" It is mentioned in Surah Al-A'raf, verse 172. It is a rhetorical question that was addressed to all humans by Allah before their souls were breathed into their bodies, asking them to acknowledge Him as their Lord and to worship Him alone.

³⁰⁹ "Kun fayakun" is an Arabic phrase that means "Be, and it is." It is often associated with the concept of Allah's power to create and make things happen with just His command. It appears in the Qur'an as a command used by Allah to create various things.

Itulah kato Tuhan yang rahman	That is what the Merciful God said
Manjawabnyo Nur manjawab Nyawa Iyolah Ballahwasyahidnah	Nur answered the soul, Yes, indeed, I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger ³¹⁰
Adapun kami sudah manyarah Tohid ka Allah mangaku setia Apo-apo karajo indak katingga Pikiah dek siding ini sejarah Kok imbau lah nyato kalamlah sudah Kok asalnyo nyawa lah kami pajilah Lah tadanga pulo asal kulimah	As for us, we have surrendered To the oneness of Allah and declared our loyalty All our deeds will not be in vain Thoughts from this perspective are history The truth of the words have been reminded We have clarified the origin of the soul The origin of the words have also been heard
Hanyo dek sidang fikir sendiri Adapun nyawa tubuh nan suci Kumuahnyo nyawa kamudian terjadi Setelah masuk katubuah jasmani Karano indak manapati janji Janji samaso dirahim ummi Dayo ibilih nan inyo turuti Itulah sabab kanarako jadi Soal pangajian sakian dibari Dengan wasalam kami sudahi.	Just by thinking on your own Regarding the pure body and soul The soul disappears when entering the physical body Because the promise was not kept A promise made in the mother's womb Choose the path you follow That's the reason why it happened This religious lecture ends here Let's end with peace be upon you

This story of Nur is explicitly related to practical *dakwah*, the teaching of the Five Pillars using a passage from the Qur'an, *surah al-a'raf ayat 172*. It is the story of divine creation beginning with Nur, or Light, and as oral tradition represents Minang Muslim narrative practices around declarations of Islamic identity and moral living.

The *lagu cancang* is the longest section of a *tanggak salawat dulang*, and Firdaus considers the *lagu cancang* to contain the most relevant information on Islamic education. While the earlier sections include sacred phrases, the *lagu cacang* tends to be the essence of the *dakwah* component – explaining beliefs and values based on the Qur'an, explaining what they are, and how they are founded upon the Qur'an. The example above about the story of Nur and Allah's Creation of the world as we know it is an excellent example of this quality of *lagu cancang*. Another example of Islamic education and proselytization within the sung text is the "Q&A" section, called "Tanya

³¹⁰ "Ballahwasyahidnah" is an Arabic phrase commonly used in Islamic creed which means "We bear witness that there is no deity but Allah."

Jawab.” This section mimics the typical Q&A sections in Islamic magazines like *Gema Islam* (discussed in Chapter Two), where subscribers submit questions for religious leaders to offer solutions based upon their shared theological affiliation. In *salawat dulang*, after the performers present Islamic musings based on a certain theme, the performers engage in *tanya-jawab* where they ask and respond to questions posed by the opposing *salawat dulang* pair. In this setup, the questions and answers are meant to challenge their opponent and accentuate the “battle” quality of the evening between the two groups. What can happen is that the event organizer will collect questions from the audience and present these to the performers, who then improvise their response. The nature of this section amplifies the performers (and especially the *induk*/leader of the pair) as *ustad*, as religious scholars and leaders in the community. They must be well versed in the Islamic texts in order to provide answers, descriptions, and make rhymes, all within quick succession. Topics that are most often discussed during this section (and that are debated across the two groups) are matters of mystical teachings (*tasawuf*). They are also typically connected to the event of the *salawat dulang* performance itself. If the performance is to celebrate Isra and Mi’raj (the two nights of the Prophet’s Night Journey), then the matter in question will be that of Isra and Mi’raj; or if the performance celebrates Mawlid, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, then the matter in question will be Mawlid. While the guests are occasionally allowed to ask impromptu questions, I did not encounter this at the performances I observed during my fieldwork.

To illustrate the style and pensive quality of the *tanya-jawab*, the example below is provided:

Q:
 Wahai sahabat tolan sudaro
 Pepatah Minang kan ado mangato
 Sakali batamo mencari raso-raso
 Duo kali batamu mencari sanak sudaro
 Tigo kali batamu lah patuik tanyo batanyo
 Karekan kami samo tukang curito
 Masalah diri kakami tanyo

Q:
 Dear friends and brothers and sisters,
 There is a Minang proverb that says
 Once you visit, you're looking for the taste
 Twice you visit, you're looking for relatives
 Three times you visit, only then you ask questions
 Because we're just storytellers
 We're asking about our own problems

Jan diri kecek urang diri pulo kecek kito
 Kan ado alasan handaklah baco
 Sabuah hadis kudus satanglah mangato
 Man 'arafa nafsahu Faqod 'arafa Robbahunyo
 Siapa managana akan dirinyo

Seolah mangana akan Tuhannyo
 Tantang itu bana nan kakami tanyo
 Siapa nan mangana nan dikana siapa pulo
 Jalan mangana diri barapo banyaknyo
 Tampek mangana diri dimano pulo
 Jadi sado itu kami batanyo
 Tolonglah jawab sasudah iko
 Jo relah hati manjawab tanyo

A:
 Soal pangajian sakian dibaco
 Kinilah tibo pulo masonyo
 Maso kutiko manjawab tanyo
 Tadi rekan kami lah sudah batanyo
 Tanyo dilayangkan dimuko basamo
 Tapi taruntuak kakami baduo
 Masalah diri nan tolan tanyo
 Kan ado alasan bak kato sudaro
 Man 'arafa nafsahu faqod 'arafa robbahunyo
 Siapa mangana akan dirinyo seolah mangana akan
 Tuhannyo
 Siapa nan mangana na dikana siapa?...
 Jalan mangana diri barapo banyaknyo?...
 Tampek mangana diri dimana pulo?...
 Kiro-kiro baitu bunyinyo tanyo

Ini jawaban dari kami baduo
 Manuruik pangajian nan kami tarimo
 Urang nan mangana Uju'am namanyo
 Nan sabana diri tibo dikito
 Sedangkan nan dikana si Ujumu,at namonyo
 Nan saakmal diri tibo dikito
 Yaitu zat Allah samato-mato
 Jalan mangana diri ampek jalannyo
 Jalan syariat nan mulo pertamo
 Jalan tubuh nan kasa tibo kito
 A'yan karaji,ah satangah mangato
 Jalan tarekat jalan kaduo
 Jalan nyawa tibo dikito
 A'yan sabitah satangah mangato

We're not talking about other people
 There is a reason why we are reading this
 One holy hadith should be heard
 'Man 'arafa nafsahu Faqod 'arafa Robbahunyo'³¹¹
 Whoever knows oneself, knows his Lord

Truly, whoever claims to know His Lord,
 The challenge we pose is this:
 Whoever claims to know Him, then who is he?
 What path should one take to know Him well?
 Where should one look for Him?
 These are our questions.
 Please answer them now
 Whoever is willing to answer our questions with sincerity

A:
 The question about this religious gathering is being read
 Here we all are as the listeners
 Can anyone answer this question?
 Our colleague has read out this question earlier
 This question is raised among us
 But the answer is difficult to find
 Our own problems become the question
 There is a reason why we say it like that
 'Man 'arafa nafsahu Faqod 'arafa Robbahunyo
 Whoever knows himself as if he knows his Lord

Whoever claims to know, then where is he?
 How many paths must be taken to know oneself well?
 Where should we search for ourselves?
 That's how the question goes

This is our response, the two of us
 Listening to the lecture that we received
 The person referred to as Uju'am is his name
 Who is now here with us
 While the one over there is named Ujumu'at
 Who is also present there with us
 Namely the Almighty God
 Guiding us in this life
 Showing us the path of shariah as the main foundation
 Showing us the path of the body that we must go through
 The path of work, and if we listen
 The path of tarekat³¹² is the second path
 The path of the soul that we must meet

³¹¹ "Man 'arafa nafsahu Faqod 'arafa Robbahunyo" is an Arabic phrase that means "Whoever knows oneself, knows his Lord." It is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge and introspection in one's spiritual journey.

³¹² "Tarekat" is a term used in Islam that refers to a mystical or spiritual path, often associated with Sufism. It is a way of seeking a deeper understanding and connection with Allah through meditation, contemplation, and other spiritual practices. Tarekat involves following a spiritual guide, known as a "Sheikh" or "Murshid," who helps to guide the seeker on their path towards greater spiritual enlightenment. The ultimate goal of tarekat is to attain a state of closeness and union with Allah.

Tubuah nan halus kajadi juo
 Jalan hakikat jalan katigo
 Jalan rusiah itu namonyo
 Nan sabana diri tibo dikito
 Siuju'am satangah mangato
 Jalan ma'rifat jalan kaampekyo
 Mamandang Allah zat samato
 Tampek mangana diri dangakan pulo
 Yaitu dihamparan nan putih disitu tampeknyo
 Dihati nan suci jilah samparono
 Dikapalo jantuang tampek basimpuahnyo
 Ditago hayat kan jadi juo
 Nur Muhammad pado hakikatnyo
 Selalu bagantuang ka Allah satiok nafas kito
 Sakiro lah bajawab tolan batanyo
 Sabari ndak hilang satitiak ndak lupu
 Baitu kaberesnyo manjawab tanyo

The path of sabitah³¹³ if we listen
 Subtle like the essence of this object
 The path of the truth is the third path
 The path of rusiah³¹⁴ is its name
 All of this we must encounter
 If we listen attentively
 The path of ma'rifat³¹⁵ is the path that must be taken
 Observing the Almighty God
 As seen here
 Namely in a sacred and clean place
 In a pure and clear heart
 In a gathering of pure people
 (line missing in Indonesian)
 We must always worship Allah
 (line missing in Indonesian)
 Always ready to answer questions
 Patient without losing patience, without forgetting
 This is the way to answer questions

This example above was a popular question/answer performed by Arjuna Minang, the *salawat dulang* group led by Firdaus. It shows how and where Islamic teachings are inserted into the structure of the *lagu cacang* in *salawat dulang* performances. In this example, the question of self-knowledge is brought up, introducing the Arabic proverb: *Man a,arafa nafsahu faqod a'rafa Robbahu / Siapa mengenal akan dirinya seolah mengenal akan Tuhannya / Whoever knows oneself, knows his Lord*. According to the performer's teachings/learning, there are four pathways to knowing oneself (and therefore knowing God). These pathways are *sharia/syariat (jalan tubuh yang kasar atau jasmani / the physical path)*; *tarekat (jalan nyawa atau rohani / the spiritual path)*; *hakikat (jalan rasia, rasa, dan perasaan / the sensorial path, mystical truth)*; and *makrifat (selalu memandang Allah / final mystical knowledge)*. These four pathways map onto the stations of Sufi learning, also called the Four Doors of Sufism.

³¹³ "Sabitah" in Islamic terminology refers to the seven levels of consciousness or spiritual stations that a Sufi must pass through in order to achieve a state of enlightenment and closeness to God. These stations are purification, repentance, fear, hope, renunciation, satisfaction, and proximity.

³¹⁴ "Rusiah" in Minang refers to the state of being corrupted or flawed. It is often used in the context of spiritual or religious teachings to describe a deviation from the right path or the corruption of one's faith.

³¹⁵ Ma'rifat is an Arabic word that means "knowledge" or "recognition." In the Islamic mystical tradition, it refers to the experiential knowledge of God or divine reality through direct personal experience or gnosis. It is considered a higher form of knowledge that goes beyond intellectual understanding or book knowledge.

The *lagu cancang* also includes a lengthy entertainment portion. This comes after the *tukang* pair has delivered their particular message (*penyampaikan teks buah*, such as the story of Nur above) and answered in verse the questions posed to them by their opponent. They will typically ask a question in return to be answered by their opponent in the next *tanggak*. The entertainment part of *lagu cancang* is quite playful and involves more direct interaction with the audience; it is often the most highly anticipated section of the performance, with popular songs and jokes inserted into their performance. Performers freely insert their own messages at this time, whether they are political, social, or cultural, and they are often presented through familiar sounds from popular music, including songs from *dangdut*, Bollywood, Islamic *qasidah*, and even Korean pop. The performers' skills as contemporary artists are reflected in this section. Here, they show that they are traditional singers and religious scholars on one hand (exemplified in the *khutbah*, *teks buah*, etc.), and local comedians, pop singers, and entertainers on the other. Songs, rhythms, and sounds from these different styles are borrowed and overlaid with jokes in Minang to engage the audience. There is also a theatrical element, where the pair may decide to stop playing and singing altogether to have a short conversation, typically involving the "follower" asking the "leader" for clarifications that would allow the lead to show off their unique skills. In one performance by a younger pair, the lead (Jon Cakra, who is also a popular Minang comedian) used this section regularly to mimic other languages like Hindi, Mandarin, and Japanese. Using nonsense words, he identified stereotypical tones and sounds from these languages and presented himself as a polyglot, albeit his ability to convince the audience relied upon the sonic stereotyping of these languages and their cultures. The effect of this was so successful that many other *salawat dulang* pairs, including my teacher's group Arjuna Minang, began to include this theatrical "linguistic analysis" in their own *lagu cancang*.

This entertainment section of *lagu cancang* is an opportunity for performers to stray away from the original “theme” of the evening’s event, as long as they maintain respect for their audience and for Islam as the community’s roots. It is here that the improvisational skills of the performers are tested and the competitive elements with their opponent come to life. As this section becomes increasingly theatrical, the performers must read their audience quickly to understand their desires and find creative ways of alluding to them in performance. What results is an acknowledgement of the cultural cachet to keep their audience entertained with popular songs and motifs, all the while remaining within the structure of a religious, traditional format. This innovation is key to *salawat dulang*’s success and sustained relevance to the local community, but it must always align with the values of Islamic learning which inform the foundation of *salawat dulang* and its oral tradition. These two components must go hand in hand.

Penutup/Closing

The closing section, *penutup*, is quite short and often returns to a slower rhythm with more serious *syairs* and reminders of Allah. Some performers, like the comedian Cakra mentioned above, use this serious conclusion as a way to further entertain his listeners. His swift transition from a goofy comedian to the ultra-serious *ustad* consistently generates further laughter from the audience.

This closing section is characterized by a humble plea towards their opponent group and then to their audience. In the example below, there is the inclusion of a *pantun tarekat* (indicated in bold) that, as the stories go, is based on a phrase in the Al-Qur’an, *surah al-qashashi, ayat 88*. This *ayat* explains that to achieve true happiness in this world and in the afterlife, one must

surrender oneself to Allah. Without God, everything will be destroyed and perish. An opposing group may take this concept on to improvise a response in their subsequent *tanggak*.

To opponent:

Wahai sahabat tolan sudaro
 Dari pado kami sakian sajo
 Mari dikandakan karekan kito
 Karekan kami samo tukang curito
 Tolonglah sambuang sasudah iko
 Jo buah nan rancak jo lagu nan sero
 Pinonton mandangah nak sanang hatinyo
 Pitatah petitih kan ado mangato
 Kucikak kucindam pamenan kato

Sirauik bari baulu

**Diambiak parunciang kalam
 Kalaulah lalauik jadi parahu
 Dima juo kito kakaram**

To opponent:

Dear true friends of ours,
 That's all we want to say
 Let's enjoy this time together
 As we are people who love to tell stories
 Please give me a chance,
 So that I can sing a beautiful and melodious song
 Everyone will be happy to listen to it
 Pitatah petitih kan ado mangato
 Kucikak kucindam pamenan kato

Bite the bullet

**take up the pen
 if the boat sails away
 we will all be left behind³¹⁶**

Salawat dulang prose is beautiful, introspective, and playful all at once. The excerpts shared above provide a glimpse into the vast possibilities that *tukang salawat dulang* utilize in making each performance unique and a special listening experience for their audience. Above all, these passages reveal the depth of Islamic information embedded within the vocal performance – not a mere signal towards Islam, but rather a careful and serious explanation of complicated verses and Muslim concepts. At the beginning of the *tanya-jawab* section, Firdaus' script includes the line: "Because we're just storytellers." The humility of this line is striking. Not only are *tukang salawat dulang* "people who love to tell stories" (as stated in the *penutup* above), they are also learned Muslims and respected community members, whose words and actions both in performance and in everyday life serve as models for modern Muslim Minang identity and expression.

In the final sections of this chapter, discussion around changes under Suharto's New Order will situate the evolving landscape of *salawat dulang* as Minang traditional performing arts today

³¹⁶ This stanza is a call to take action and not let opportunities pass by.

and the manner in which the style has maintained its relevance in response to our modernizing world.

IV. FLEXIBILITY IN FORM: A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Chapter Two suggested the important shift in the cultural arts landscape under Suharto's New Order, a period of extreme governance that limited dissent to its new national memory construction. Beginning in 1965, the national arts academies began to form with initiatives to codify, stratify, and nationalize the arts in accordance with Suharto's ongoing societal reform (*perkembangan*). While many Indonesians, including artists, experienced this period as one of state terrorism, Chapter Two opened a discussion of how some groups benefited from the anti-communist paranoia of post-1965 Indonesia. The interests of modernist Muslim groups, which included groups like HSBI that was committed to defining and conceptualizing an Indonesian Islamic arts space, gained traction at the expense of their counterparts to the Left. Under Suharto's New Order, the modernist Muslim voices that informed HSBI's *fatwa* on Islamic arts took part in how Islamic art forms were categorized and documented. Art forms like *salawat dulang* were not exempt from these efforts. *Tukang salawat dulang*, just like other artists, found themselves in a position needing to acquiesce to the demands of New Order agendas. Yet they also appealed to the Islamic nature of their art forms, allowing their identification as *dakwah* arts to serve as a sort of protection against excessive state oppression. This is not to say that *salawat dulang* practitioners could avoid the pressures of New Order politics, but rather they found avenues to grow, thrive, and become prosperous under the New Order. These avenues included a deeper connection to the Islamic heritage of the *salawat dulang* form as well as an embrace of the form's built-in flexibility

to adapt to a new political environment. *Tukang salawat dulang* simultaneously reference the past and innovate in the present, and this dual performance is key to its success.

Practitioners trace several changes that took place to the *salawat dulang* form beginning in the 1970s, and these changes are significant because they allow us to map *salawat dulang* onto an evolving construction of Islamic identity as new stressors were introduced. Suharto's New Order government provided new directives for all performing arts, requiring more virtuosic repertoires to be performed at certain festivals and demanding new political propaganda speech reflected in vocals for political campaigns. What resulted was a shift in *salawat dulang* to become more formalized and public-facing (this shift was felt across the performing arts, not just *salawat dulang*). Groups with names like Gas Baracun, Langkisau, and Arjuna Minang formed.³¹⁷ Prior to this period, groups did not come together under a stage name; rather, individuals formed pairs casually to reflect regional styles from across West Sumatra. As groups formed and began to perform together regularly, they attracted a following based on their stage persona, individual style, and their potential to entertain.³¹⁸ By the time my teacher emerged as a prominent *tukang salawat dulang* with his group Arjuna Minang in the 1980s, recordings of *salawat dulang* sets were becoming popularized and cassette tapes widely distributed. Traditionally safeguarded by men, *salawat dulang* also opened itself to female practitioners, though men were and still are in the majority.³¹⁹ Alternate messages, political or otherwise, were freely inserted into *salawat dulang* performances, mostly in the *lagu cancang* section.

³¹⁷ The name of this last group, Arjuna Minang, is actually unusual in Minang contexts. Arjuna, a name from the Mahabharata cycle of stories, is not popular in West Sumatra. The Ramayana and Mahabharata stories are not as culturally important as they are in Java and Bali. Firdaus, who is the leader of Arjuna Minang, attributes his group name to the influence he felt in Java when he lived and studied there in his youth. Interview with Firdaus, interview by Katia Chaterji, May 22, 2019.

³¹⁸ Interview with Admiral, interview by Katia Chaterji, November 7, 2019.

³¹⁹ Interview with Rita Marsusianti, interview by Katia Chaterji, December 30, 2019.

In the context of the performing arts academies, these schools became training sites for performers as “bureaucrats-teachers” with opportunities to teach and to become eligible for government-sponsored performances and travel abroad.³²⁰ This incorporation into a national arts institution meant both financial security and the preservation of their local arts forms (albeit sanitized or truncated versions). At ASKI Padangpanjang (now ISI Padangpanjang), Pak Firdaus spearheaded the introduction of *salawat dulang* into the Karawitan department’s curriculum in the 1980s after he completed his own graduate work in Java and returned home to West Sumatra.³²¹ He was the first teacher to develop the *salawat dulang* program on campus, and he believes himself to be the first to write down the sung texts, which he did in order to teach his students. Formalization of *salawat dulang* in the arts academy setting made the form more accessible to some groups (female students, for example), while simultaneously adapting itself to suit new demands of audience and sponsorship. Large state competitions and festivals were a key feature of the New Order (and which continue to be important events in Indonesia today), and invitations to perform secured income and visibility for certain arts forms. Cultural historian Jennifer Lindsay explores how cultural policy (governmental structures, funding, and policies) influences cultural expression itself and vice versa, notably through the state’s modern role as patron of the arts.³²² Along this vein, the arts academies serve as sites to mold and stylize upcoming performing artists

³²⁰ Lindsay, “A Drama of Change: Cultural Policy and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia,” 70.

³²¹ As discussed in the Introduction, the arts campus in Padangpanjang was originally formed as a local school for Minangkabau arts under the title KOKAR and was established under federal decree as ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia) Padangpanjang in 1965 with two departments, Karawitan (Traditional Music) and Tari (Dance). In 1999, the campus was renamed STSI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia) Padangpanjang, at which point it began to add new departments including Theater, Music, Fine Arts, etc. and eventually a Postgraduate program. In 2010, the campus was renamed as ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia, or Indonesia Institute of Arts) Padangpanjang. As part of the national arts academy system, ISI Padangpanjang joins several other campuses across Indonesia: Yogyakarta (Java), Surakarta (Java), and Denpasar (Bali), as well as ISBI (Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia) campuses in Bandung (Java) and more recently in Aceh (Aceh) and Tanah Papua (West Papua).

³²² Lindsay, “A Drama of Change: Cultural Policy and the Performing Arts in Southeast Asia.”

in a manner more likely to be supported by the state (and thus receive funding and visibility opportunities).

Practitioners took on roles as multifaceted civil servants, combining their position as state employee with other jobs to balance their identity as artists (college teachers, religious scholars, pop singers, comedians, YouTube stars, etc.) and increase potential for income. Pak Firdaus frequently explained that because *salawat dulang* was valued for its religious content and the virtuosity of its performers, he was paid more for performing than many other traditional arts styles. Off-campus performances thus provide essential income to supplement a civil servant salary. Firdaus himself was quite well-known for his stage persona – in addition to being a long-term instructor at the arts academy, he performed *salawat dulang* regularly and was invited to sing pop Minang songs at weddings and other events. He was also regularly invited to deliver the Friday sermons at mosques around the area.

All of these changes suggest that *salawat dulang* during and after the New Order centers the performance personality of its artists and its potential to entertain. Yet running parallel to this investment in the performer's persona is *salawat dulang*'s persistence as an explicitly Islamic arts form. Islamic lessons and meanings are represented in all five sections from the beginning until the closing, and the cultural significance of *salawat dulang*'s role in Minang Islamic history is deeply felt by practitioners and audience viewers alike. It is because *salawat dulang* successfully balances its religiosity with inherent flexibility that the form has survived over generations and continues to meet the needs of an evolving community. Flexibility is built into the *salawat dulang* form just as it is within the Islamic faith. Neither are inherently rigid. In adapting, *salawat dulang* in fact stays true to its tradition of spontaneity and flexibility, just as Islam also changes shape to adapt to local communities and needs.

An unwillingness to improvise would result in the form losing its cultural influence, as might be seen in a *salawat dulang tuo* (“old” *salawat dulang*) style from Maninjau, a town to the northwest of Padangpanjang that borders one of West Sumatra’s picturesque lakes by the same name. There, Firdaus and I visited with a small group of five men who kept their *tuo* tradition alive. Their vocalizations evoked the slow, chant-like qualities of the *khutbah* sections I had grown accustomed to, but there was minimal variation – they stayed within this range and tempo for the duration of their 40-minute presentation. These men held *rebana*, a large frame drum with stretched animal hide (typically goatskin), in place of the brass *dulang*; while both items function similarly as instruments, they each represent different musical traditions. *Rebana* traditions themselves are quite active across West Sumatra in both traditional and popularized iterations, much like another frame drum style called *indang*. The awareness of frame drums relative to *salawat dulang* is reflected in the smaller representation of *salawat dulang* in musical histories of Sumatra.³²³ This imbalance means, however, that frame drums are more available than the brass *dulang* for players to practice. This small group of men in Maninjau, despite playing on *rebana* and singing in a manner of the *khutbah* that both *rebana* and *salawat dulang* traditions share, considered themselves *tukang salawat dulang tuo*, not *tukang dikia rebana*, as the frame drum vocal style is known (see figure 3.6). Anticipating this, Firdaus had brought a few *dulang* with us and lent them to the musicians to play. I was reminded of Firdaus’ students on campus who, after months of practicing *salawat dulang* rhythms and vocalizations using their bodies, binders, or other everyday objects, were handed a heavy brass *dulang* for the first time to play in front of their teacher. The

³²³ In Kartomi’s musical history collection of Sumatra’s many provinces, she dedicates less than two pages to *salawat dulang*. Traditions from West Sumatra and Riau provinces receive their own book section, and Sufi Muslim genres in Minangkabau their own chapter. The small discussion of *salawat dulang* in this latter chapter is likely a reflection of the form’s lower visibility compared to those like *indang*, *dikia (zikir)*, or *tabuih*. See: Margaret J. Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra* (Baltimore, MD, USA University of Illinois Press, 2012).

dexterity to switch instruments around based on availability is truly reflective of *salawat dulang*'s history of improvised *dakwah*.



Figure 3.6: A performance of *dikia rebana* to open a *pencak silek* (martial arts) festival in Maninjau in September, 2019.

Source: Katia Chaterji

What first attracted Firdaus and I to Maninjau was the rumor of an older form of *salawat dulang* still being practiced there. In meeting with this group of men, we witnessed their arts practice and learned that they struggled to find students and to book performance opportunities. Unlike Firdaus' popular Arjuna Minang group, the men in Maninjau practiced a private-oriented *salawat dulang* where they gathered at one of their homes to talk, partake in coffee and cigarettes, and play casually with one another. Their tradition was orally transmitted, with no written "texts" to supplement their learning. Firdaus and I discussed how their style, focused on the private rather than the public, was an example of an earlier form of *salawat dulang* from before the popularization of performance groups that focused on regional style. This style was rarely seen in West Sumatra at the time of my research; it was considered a tradition at risk of disappearing.

Unlike *salawat dulang* as performed and taught by the likes of Firdaus, *salawat dulang tuo* sung exclusively religious stories from the Qur'an in the Minang language. These musicians did not include sections that embraced interaction with an audience through entertainment or improvisation. This meant that they were inflexible in incorporating new elements – their understanding of the style's format did not make space for such spontaneity. Without the room for

flexibility, *salawat dulang tuo* certainly was not a tradition through which personal or political messages could be expressed. Its resistance to such innovation would have meant that the gap between this tradition and the *salawat dulang* that is practiced today only deepened under the dynamics of the New Order, a period when many *salawat dulang* practitioners embraced changes to remain relevant and in demand for Minang Muslim communities. In my conversations with practitioners who lived during the New Order, most expressed nonchalance about incorporating external messages into their performance. Their indifference meant that they did not find it difficult or distressing to change some words here and there, mostly in the *lagu cancang* section that was designed to be improvised. The musicians in Maninjau, however, took issue with shifting their content away from Qur'anic messages. Their resistance to such change was founded upon ideological conviction. They maintained *salawat dulang*'s deep connection to Islamic learning in West Sumatra, but they were rigid in embracing the form's potential for innovation – they could reference, but not innovate.

The example of *salawat dulang tuo* suggests the importance of *salawat dulang*'s dual performance of referencing Islamic pasts and innovating for needs in the present. Without both sides, the form will lose participation and visibility as seen in Maninjau. The groups that successfully achieve both parts of this performance become the versions that sustain the tradition for future generations. These are the versions that remain in demand for public performances, and practitioners seek to continually adapt to stay relevant for their audience and, of equal importance, to ensure profitability.

V. CONCLUSION

This chapter's focus on *salawat dulang* – the Minang oral tradition as *dakwah*, its local history and connection to Sufi Islamization in Sumatra, and its dual participation in referencing Islamic pasts while innovating for the needs of the present – seeks to show how practitioners of this tradition negotiate the form on their own terms. Practitioners of *salawat dulang* bring Islamic histories to life and into continual relevance for themselves as practitioners and for their audiences. Its survival as a popular Islamic arts tradition in West Sumatra rests on its unwavering Islamic core and its inherent flexibility to adapt and innovate.

Salawat dulang provides a valuable lens for understanding how Indonesian Islamic arts and identity may be formulated in response to localized histories of Islam. *Salawat dulang* reinforces the legitimacy of Islam in Minang communities of West Sumatra and connects Minang Islam to broader constructions of Islamic culture. Through *salawat dulang*, performing artists establish themselves as both Minang and Islamic, holding space for both identities as mutually constituted. *Salawat dulang*, then, becomes a channel through which local Islamic history and identity are embodied, experienced, and interpreted through performance, and how these intersectional identities facilitate multifaceted understandings of belongingness. In line with Chapter Two which discussed commitments to Islamic culture as Indonesian culture, *salawat dulang* is representative of how local Minang culture contributes to a wider constellation of Islamic and Indonesian identities. We continue to examine this process in Chapter Four through another Islamic arts form, *zapin*.

CHAPTER FOUR

BODIES THAT ‘FLOW LIKE WATER’: ZAPIN DANCE AND FEMALE CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MALAY ISLAMIC

*Lancang Kuning berlayar malam,
Haluan menuju ke lautan dalam.*

Lancang Kuning sails at night,
Heading towards the deep sea.

*Kalau nahkoda kuranglah paham,
Alamat kapal akan tenggelam.*

If the captain is not knowledgeable,
The ship will sink.

*Lancang kuning menentang badai,
Tali kemudi berpilit tiga.*

Lancang Kuning battles against the storm,
The helm ropes are strained by three

- Malay Pantun *Lancang Kuning*³²⁴

This chapter addresses how the history of Islam in Indonesia’s Sumatran province of Riau informs the variable ways in which Islamic identity is cast through *zapin* dance, a medium that provides performers with fluid possibilities to embody tradition, assert self-belonging, and/or challenge traditional gender constructions. Centering the stories of *zapin* that practitioners weave into their practice – what *zapin* is, how it came to be, and why it continues to be taught and performed – reflects upon the Islamic arts as a productive site of negotiation in cultural and gender identities. In doing so, this chapter explores what it means for performing artists to contribute to historical memory production and to make meaning of Muslim identities. In what follows, we learn of *zapin*’s origins as the form has been passed down by practitioners, historical processes of Islamization in Riau, Islamic performativity, and finally three instances of *zapin* performance in

³²⁴ Many thanks to Ika Hutami who provided a much more eloquent translation of this pantun than I could myself.

the Malay milieu that demonstrate the dynamic possibilities for historical memory and identity expression in the performing arts. But we begin as aspiring dancers begin: practice.

I. BUMI LANCANG KUNING: ARRIVAL IN RIAU AND AN INTRODUCTION TO ZAPIN

Newly arrived in central Riau from the cool microclimate of Padangpanjang (240 km to the west), I feel myself wilt in Pekanbaru's late afternoon heat. I am about an hour into a practice session with Wadah Seni Melayu, a *zapin* performing arts club that practices daily in Pekanbaru's Bandar Serai complex, a well-known public gathering space since Indonesia's prestigious national Qur'anic recitation competition took place there in 1994 (the 17th Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an Nasional, or MTQ). We are dancing in one of the many spacious courtyards that connect life-size architectural models of traditional Malay houses (*rumah adat*) from select municipalities of Riau province. In the shadow of Anjungan Seni Indrus Tintin, the looming modern theater building that can seat 600 people, we dance in front of the smaller *rumah adat* pavilion in the style of Indragiri Hulu from southwestern Riau. Indragiri is one of the five major rivers that flow through Riau province, connecting the agricultural hinterland with the coastal foreland on the Straits of Malacca. In Riau, my friend Angga tells me, it is one's relation to local waterways that matters most. Here in Bumi Lancang Kuning (a romantic name for Riau), as many people explained to me, it is important to understand your position as upstream (*hulu*) or downstream (*hilir*) rather than according to the cardinal directions (*yang pentingnya perbedaan hulu-hilir, bukan utara-selatan*).

Such beliefs reflect the centrality of the ocean and its connected waterways in Malay maritime histories. And Sumatra, the imposing island on the western cusp of the Indonesian archipelago, boasts an incredible tradition of trans-oceanic travel and interaction. Through descriptions left by travelers the likes of 7th century Buddhist pilgrim I-Tsing in the "country of

Malayu,” 13th century Venetian Marco Polo’s perplexing account of Sumatra as “Little Java,” 14th century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta in Pasai, and 15th century Ma Huan accompanying Ming Admiral Zheng He’s voyage across the “Western Oceans,” Sumatran landscapes and peoples figure prominently in their accounts.³²⁵ Textual references such as these substantiate later archaeological evidence in the 20th century that argued for an understanding of historical Sumatra as a significant place of cross-cultural exchange with numerous riverine, trade-oriented harbor cities brimming with goods and materials sent from the countryside upstream.³²⁶ The Malay language, too, is indicative of such dynamic historical exchange, functioning as a primary lingua franca of trade in the region.

Dari India, kak? Am I from India, asks Farah, the young woman next to me. Reflexively, I smile, remembering the countless times I had wished to be acknowledged as South Asian growing up, mixed race, between the US and India. Here in Riau, where Bollywood’s tremendous cultural influence makes light-skinned, dark-featured faces like mine familiar, I need not justify myself. An unexpected boon from an otherwise colorist/casteist industry, I think. Farah, who is in her first semester at Lancang Kuning University in the performing arts department, continues to tell me which film stars she admires, and which ones are the best dancers.

Hrithik and Madhuri, I insist, dating myself next to Gen-Z’s preference for Tiger.³²⁷

³²⁵ I-tsing, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A. D. 671-695)*, trans. Junjirō Takakusu, *Buddhist Practices in India*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896); Hugh Murray, *The Travels of Marco Polo, Greatly Amended and Enlarged from Valuable Early Manuscripts Recently Published by the French Society of Geography, and in Italy by Count Baldelli Boni* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1870); Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battūta: Travels in Asia and Africa : 1325-1354*, *Broadway Travellers* (London: Darf, 1983); Ma Huan, *Yingyai Shenglan: “The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores” [1433]* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus, 1997).

³²⁶ Pierre-Yves Manguin, “Palembang and Sriwijaya: An Early Malay Harbour-City Rediscovered,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 66, no. 1 (264) (1993): 23–46; O. W. Wolters, “Restudying Some Chinese Writings on Sriwijaya,” *Indonesia*, no. 42 (1986): 1–41.

³²⁷ Hrithik Roshan and Madhuri Dixit are Bollywood actors who are wildly popular due to their dancing skill. Jai Hemant “Tiger” Shroff is a Bollywood dancing heartthrob of a younger generation.

The globalization of Bollywood and the depth of its fandom in Indonesia continues to surprise me – but as discussed in the previous chapter, the presence of Bollywood musical themes and linguistic mimicry in Minang *salawat dulang* shows not just the far-reaching scope of the film industry but perhaps more importantly the functionality of Bollywood for traditional arts practitioners to transcend generational gaps and attract young listeners to their art form. So too, it would seem, does the dancing culture of Bollywood encourage Malay youth in Riau to start dancing, albeit in traditional, not Bollywood, styles. This heavy presence of India that I feel in modern Indonesia is an interesting counterweight to the historical travelers from the Indian Subcontinent who found their way to Sumatra and beyond, as traders, religious missionaries, and saints. That this place and its peoples – past and present – harbor such familiarity with India is an unexpected comfort to me on this hot day in Pekanbaru.

Farah and I quiet down as Pak Piang, lead dance instructor for Wadah Seni Melayu, returns to our group. We are learning basic stepping for a traditional Malay music and dance genre called *zapin*. Having come to Riau from Institut Seni Indonesia-Padangpanjang, one of Indonesia's national arts colleges and the only institute branch located in all of Sumatra, I already had experience watching and dancing *zapin*. On our campus in West Sumatra, however, the strong and assertive characteristics of Minangkabau culture, rooted as it is in Islamic martial arts, have a tendency to overshadow the subtle, gentle nuances of Malay art forms from elsewhere in the Malay world. My dance teacher insisted that I travel to the Malay heartland in Riau, where the landscape, quotidian activities, and the performing arts together reinforce the *halus* (refined) and *sopan-santun* (courteous) values of Malay culture. I hardly needed urging. Arranging for *Travel* (shared rides run by small car companies), I crossed the windy and mountainous West Sumatra-Riau border to arrive in Pekanbaru about 240 kilometers inland (approximately 7 hours by car). Making my

way towards Bandar Serai complex, I passed the central roundabout in front of the Governor's Office. Surrounded by large Malay pavilion-style government buildings, an imposing granite sculpture called *Tugu Zapin* rises from the center: two *zapin* dancers, one male and one female, stand facing each other with arms outstretched, their clothing delicately carved into the stone to appear billowing in the wind. *Zapin*'s importance within Malay culture in Riau, evidenced at least by the prominent placement of *Tugu Zapin* at the center of Riau's governmental square, is displayed for all to see.

The first *zapin* choreography that every dancer learns is *alif*, a broad category of foundational dance steps, the first of which is a simple walking and turn step.³²⁸ *Zapin* is a dance style driven by its footwork. Its 8-beat rhythm emphasizes the upbeat (starting on beat 8, dancers accentuate beats 8 and 4 instead of 1 and 5) with taps of the foot, slight bounces in the knees or hips, and the swaying of forearms, wrists, arms, and head. To complete *alif*, Farah and I count in on the upbeat – beat 8 – with a tap of the right foot (just the toe or the full ball of the foot) parallel to the left foot, which remains grounded and facing forward. We are careful not to shift our weight fully to the left as we might if standing on one leg, a habit that many early *zapin* dancers find hard to break. Keeping the body's weight equally balanced between the right and left feet at all times is a mark of *zapin* skill, as this ensures that the dancer is prepared to move either leg quickly without the visible, and awkward, shifting of weight that would disrupt the clean, straight line of the body that *zapin* demands.

From this starting position, we count the first beat by taking our right foot, currently paused on the toe with knee bent, and we step straight back, careful to move in a straight line (not at a diagonal, which would require movement from the hips) and with toes pointing forward (not turned

³²⁸ Mohd Anis Md Nor, *Zapin, Folk Dance of the Malay World*, South-East Asian Social Science Monographs (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

out), so as to trace a straight line with the feet. The left foot follows with another step back; the right foot responds with a playful step forward, returning us back to where we started. This time as we step forward, we plant the heel of our foot down first before the left foot joins in parallel with a toe tap, mimicking the right foot just moments before. *Satu, dua, tiga, empat...Mundur, mundur, jalan, titip* (One, two three, four...Back, back, forward, tap), Farah and I whisper to ourselves.

On five, our left toe advances forward, heel first, followed by the right foot. On seven, we combine our left foot forward with a 180-degree turn, widening the sweep of our right arm and bending our torsos slightly to soften the abrupt turn. After turning, we tap the right toe just parallel to the left foot, both feet facing forward, arriving at beat 8 ready for the next sequence. *Lima, enam, tujuh, delapan...Jalan, jalan, putar, titip* (Five, six, seven, eight...Forward, forward, turn, tap). We are back in our starting foot position, facing the opposite direction now, and ready for the next 8-beat measure. As Farah and I move through the steps, 8-beats at a time, I feel a heightened awareness of the line I am tracing through the dust on the brick below my feet. With each measure, we etch a straight line into the ground, tracing its axis with such focus so as to always stay on its course. Pak Piang says our eyes must be lowered, and both Farah and I immediately stare at our feet as we continue moving through *alif*. Pak Piang laughs, saying it looks like we are trying too hard. Gaze down but ahead of your feet – not *at* them. Trace the straight line of *alif* with your eyes first; your feet will follow. And so they did.

The emphasis placed on straightness in *alif* – actualized through an upright body position with hips balanced, toes pointed ever-forward, back-and-forth steps along a straight axis, and eyes tracing an invisible straight line on the ground to guide the feet – is deeply significant within Muslim cultures. *Alif* is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet consisting of a simple vertical line

stroke (without diacritics: ا). All subsequent letters in the alphabet must first begin in *alif* before transforming into their own letter identities. Because of its prime position in the alphabet and because all other letters in Arabic must first move through *alif* before becoming themselves (*alif* alone remains unchanged), this letter figuratively suggests the absolute Oneness of God. The belief in the Oneness and transcendence of God, known as *tawhid*, is a foundational element of monotheistic Islamic *aqidah* (creed). In the Qur'an, Surah 112 (Al-'Ikhlās) describes this core belief:

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
 Say: "He is Allah, [who is] One.
 Allah, the Eternal Refuge.
 He neither begets nor is born,
 Nor is there to Him any equivalent."³²⁹

Within Islam, these four short verses are believed to dispel any and all polytheistic constructs leftover from other religious systems. Their significance is so profound that there are several instances in the Hadith tradition where the Prophet purportedly described this short surah as equivalent to one third of the entire Qur'an. The association between *alif* and *tawhid* is all the more significant given the important place of *tawhid* in Muslim daily life and practice. As a result, *alif* is sometimes translated into Bahasa Indonesia as *Satu* (One) to reflect this theological meaning and the authority of this belief.

Alif in *zapin* cannot be divorced from these literal and figurative associations. In fact, in tracing the lines of *alif* on the ground, a dancer is brought into a state of contemplation of God and His absolute Being (*memikirkan Allah saat menari*).³³⁰ Dancing *zapin* holds the potential of becoming an act of *dhikr*, of remembrance of God's Oneness, through the repetitive act of moving

³²⁹ "Al-Ikhlās: The Sincerity," The Noble Qur'an, n.d., <https://quran.com/112>. In Arabic: قُلْ هُوَ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ۝ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ۝ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ ۝ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ۝

³³⁰ Interview with Datu Arzul Jamaan, interview by Katia Chaterji, August 27, 2019.

along a straight axis in *alif*. This straight axis also projects vertically through the line of a dancer's body. In describing one's stature, the *alif* of one's body indicates an erect body position, like a staff. Standing upright (like an *alif*: ۱) is also the first body position one assumes when in prayer, the second being a kneeling position (mimicking the fourth letter *dal*: ڊ), and the last a position of prostration (like the thirteenth letter *mim*: ڻ). Both standing vertically in *alif* and moving horizontally through the *alif* step elevate a dancer's awareness of God's Oneness and require self-control and discipline.

The dancers' fingers also serve as reminders of God, formed into a tight fist with protruding thumb or a loose fist with gentle contact between the thumb and index finger only. Both hand positions, as discussed previously in Minang *salawat dulang* performances, represent an internal reminder and an external declaration of Islamic piety: a protruding thumb represents the Oneness of God and the contact between a thumb and index finger represents the inseparability of God and His Prophet.³³¹ *Tawhid*, as the guiding principle of Islamic practice and belief, is also clearly the foundation of *zapin* movement and ideology. In inscribing *tawhid* into the ground, into one's stature, and into the shape of one's hands, the *zapin* dancer is constantly reminded, and s/he is a reminder to others, of God's absolute Oneness within Islam.

I could not remember how long we practiced *alif* that afternoon; I had slowly settled into a meditative, solitary state. At first, my familiar "bodynotes" – the term Jonathan Skinner uses to describe an individual's stored muscle memory of learned movements – rebelled against the containment required for *alif*.³³² My classical Indian dance training persevered every time my chin

³³¹ Interview with Firdaus; Interview with Datu Arzul Jamaan.

³³² Skinner, "Leading Questions and Body Memories: A Case of Phenomenology and Physical Ethnography in the Dance Interview," 120.

or eyes followed my moving feet from side to side, or when a wayward foot resolutely pointed at my comfortable 45-degree angle. My bodynotes were quick to sabotage me; my side-turned gaze and outturned feet resulted in a wavy squiggle, a far cry from the desired clean and straight line of *alif*. Taking Pak Piang's suggestion, I planted my eyes on the ground about half my body length (~3 feet) in front of me. I recalled my childhood dance guru guiding me through *jyoti puja* – prayer in front of a lit candle – and imagined a single flame suspended above the ground in front of me. Allowing my eyes to soften on this point ahead, my feet stopped resisting and eventually found the straight line to follow and trace along the bricks, tethered as if by string to the point of my gaze in front of me.

Slowly, my accompanying body movements altered as well, responding to the new connection between my visual gaze and my feet. My arms swayed slightly, but they did not move far away from my center of gravity. Following the vertical axis upward through the crown of the head, my arm movements circled around in an upward lift of the wrist close to my body's core, creating a lift of the body upward on accentuated beats (a “bounce”). As I came to understand the embodiments of *alif* within *zapin*, I realized that what I had initially perceived as playful bounces to accentuate the upbeat were in fact pulses up and down the vertical *alif* created by my own body. Not merely an accessory, this gesture functions as a way for a dancer to reset along the vertical *alif* axis.

Some time later, Pak Piang called out a new step name, and we followed his movements closely. The first four counts are identical to the *alif* 8-count step we had been practicing. But on beat 4, variations are revealed. Much like the Arabic letters that must move through the shape of *alif* before developing into themselves, these subsequent steps in *zapin* move through the first four counts of *alif* before opening up to new possibilities of movement. In the first variation, a step

called *tongkat* (meaning “staff,” or simply “stick”), we extend the straight line in front of us by stepping forward with our left foot and tucking our right toe behind the left ankle, knees pointing slightly outward in a small *plié*. We repeat this four times, the last time combining the step forward with the usual 180-degree turn to land with our right foot on the toe, primed to begin the next movement. Shouting *anak ayam patah* (the next variation, meaning “broken chick”), Pak Piang begins with the usual first four counts of *alif* before tapping the left toe in front, then playfully to the left side, ever so slightly breaking the straight line we have maintained thus far. Like *tongkat* and *alif*, the *anak ayam patah* step carries us through both directions on the horizontal axis, ending with a final turn and a right toe tap to prepare the dancer for any sequence that may come next.

For the next several minutes, Pak Piang shouted out any of the taught steps, keeping us on our toes to switch between *alif*, *tongkat*, and *anak ayam patah* at a moment’s notice without misstepping. Eventually, though, he guided us to a close. The drummers on *marwas* (small frame drums), who had been using this time to practice their complex 8-beat interlocking rhythms, began a sequence of escalated drum strikes to signal the close (*tahto*). We repeated *alif*, stalling until we reach the final drumbeat – *tum* – and finally bow forward in respect (*sembah*).

Standing straight, I felt the impact of our repetitive movements in my fatigued muscles. The class was ending, and as I said goodbye to Farah, Pak Piang, and the others, I felt for the first time a personal breakthrough in my physical and mental awareness of *zapin*. Despite my familiarity with the dance before coming to Riau, I had been unaware of how a step as simple as *alif* exposes the essence and embodied nature of *zapin* as a dance form and spiritual practice. Only through a class like this, where feeling the lines of each step was emphasized instead of memorizing choreography, did I understand the connection between what I visually recognized as

zapin movement and what I physically experienced as a dancing body communicating symbols that retain and uphold religious and cultural significance.

Dusk was setting by the time I left the courtyard, and the fragrant smell of roasted corn and satay wafted through the air. Eagerly looking towards Anjungan Seni Indrus Tintin, the theater building perhaps 200 meters away from our courtyard in front of Rumah Adat Indragiri Hulu, I saw a line of food vendors setting up, scraping their grills clean and starting up their fires for a busy night ahead. That evening, I noted, the Riau Islamic Arts Festival would begin in front of Anjungan Seni Indrus Tintin. And no Malay festival in Riau is complete without a *pasar kuliner* – a night market serving up all varieties of Malay culinary specialties. After a short rest and shower, I planned to return to this park to watch the night’s performances and, of course, eat. With today’s dance practice still fresh in my mind and body, I felt hopeful that *zapin*, as I now understood it as a distinctly Malay Islamic performing arts form, would be included in that evening’s entertainment.

II. PERFORMATIVE NARRATIVES OF ISLAM, ISLAMIZATION, AND ISLAMIC ART

Rehearsals such as Wadah Seni Melayu’s practice session are excellent opportunities to observe how instructors break down a dance form as popular as *zapin* into small parts to illustrate the sensorial and affective cues that are woven into the fabric of the dance. *Zapin* styles vary considerably across the Malay world, but the form’s inseparability from Islamic core values always persists. Introduced in primary and secondary schools across Riau, *zapin* instruction becomes a site of cultural learning and habituation of prescribed Malay Islamic ethics, aesthetics, and socialized behavioral expectations based on age and gender.

Because of *zapin*’s place as a site of cultural meaning and learning, Malaysian scholar-practitioner Mohd Anis argues in favor of *zapin* as a Malay “common cultural denominator,” a

genre that is imbued with Malay cultural significance that transcends modern political borders (connecting the Malay world) and that is flexible to evolve in response to changing needs and contexts.³³³ It is also on this foundational point that Indonesian scholars Roza and Zulkifli advocate for the adoption of *zapin* in Indonesia's national primary and secondary curriculum because of its capacity to instruct youth in proper ethics and behavior appropriate for the Indonesian citizenry.³³⁴ Together, Roza, Zulkifli and Mohd Anis use *zapin* as a means of prioritizing Malay Islamic histories in relation to national and transnational identity and of legitimizing Islamic-ness as Malayness.

Engaging with *zapin* as a medium through which performers explore the social constructions of tradition, belonging, and gender, this chapter orients the reader to the long history of Islam in the Malay world and the creative tools by which performers stake individual claims to Islamic history. The following sections engage a discussion of *zapin*'s origins as it is believed to have passed down over generations, historical processes of Islamization, Islamic performativity, and three instances of *zapin* in performance that illustrate the diversity of possibilities available to practitioners.

II.I. Origins: *Dari Arab ke Melayu*

Zapin is a vibrant social music and dance form that has developed over centuries alongside Malay communities throughout Southeast Asia. Diversity in form is built into the meaning of *zapin*; different styles of *zapin* emerged wherever Malay communities practiced it, and *zapin* styles

³³³ Mohd Anis Md Nor, *Zapin, Folk Dance of the Malay World*.

³³⁴ Ellya Roza and Nur Aisyah Zulkifli, "The Contribution of Zapin as One of Malay Traditional Arts in Curriculum 2013," *Al-Ta' Lim Journal* 24, no. 2 (2017): 142–56.

are distinguished by the various locales where they developed. *Zapin Siak*, for example, denotes *zapin* in the style of Siak regency.

Malay practitioners and scholars alike believe that the term “zapin” is a direct derivative of two Arabic roots: *zaffan*, meaning “a dancer,” and *al-zafn*, which practitioners tend to translate as *gerak kaki* or *main kaki* (footwork or foot play).³³⁵ In fact, renowned dance choreographer Tom Ibnur reinforces this definition in his creative works, most clearly in his choreography of *Zafn al-Zafn*, where his dancers make intentional audible slaps with the soles of their feet, contrasting with the often silent footwork characteristic of *zapin*.³³⁶ Other practitioners, such as Mohd Anis, hold that “zapin” is an ambiguous term that is most likely related to the Arabic words for a dancer (*zaffan*) and to dance at a wedding (*zafana*),³³⁷ but that its direct lineage remains obscure to a degree that any claim to a definitive lineage is futile.³³⁸

Tracing *al-zafn* in musical history, valuable connotations emerge. In a 10th-century treatise on music, *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir*, philosopher al-Farabi describes a vague Middle Eastern movement called *al-zafn* as a “way of moving in rhythm” with “movements of the eyebrows, shoulders, head and limbs.”³³⁹ In more contemporary focus, the *al-sawt* musical tradition most commonly practiced in the Arabian Gulf (Kuwait and Bahrain) provides some potential context for these terms. Vocals and *oud* (plucked lute) form the core of *al-sawt*, and it is rhythmically

³³⁵ Interview with Datu Arzul Jamaan; Personal Communication with Tom Ibnur, January 8, 2020.

³³⁶ Trained in the dynamic Johor style of *zapin*, Tom Ibnur choreographed an item titled *Zafn al-Zafn* to be performed at Taman Ismail Marzuki in Jakarta in 2016. In a personal communication with me, Ibnur explained that he intended this item to speak to *zapin*'s Arabic roots. He chose to emphasize *zapin*'s Arab qualities through the emphasis on audible footwork (the meaning of *al-zafn* in Arabic) and the use of prayer mats. For a video of this performance, see: Tom Ibnur, *Tari Melayu Zapin Al Zaffan (Telisik Tari Melayu)*, YouTube video (Lentera Timur Channel, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxDoSYD3YnY>.

³³⁷ The Arabic script for *zafana* is: زفن

³³⁸ Anis Md Nor Mohd, *Zapin, Folk Dance of the Malay World*, South-East Asian Social Science Monographs (Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.

³³⁹ George Sawa, *Musical and Socio-Cultural Anecdotes from Kitāb al-Aghānī al-Kabīr: Annotated Translations and Commentaries*, Islamic History and Civilization ; v. 159 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2019).

sustained by hand clapping and *mirwâs* (small cylindrical double-skinned drums, a musical relative of the Malay *marwas*). A dance called *zafan* accompanies this music, characterized by men dancing in pairs who alternate between taking energetic leaps and kneeling on the ground.³⁴⁰ While neither al-Farabi's *al-zafn* nor the *zafan* of *al-sawt* can claim to be *zapin*'s direct ancestor, the mutual use of the *zafn/zaffan* roots in Arabic and the shared musical experience of dancing alongside lute, drums, and vocals indicates some cultural knowledge transfer.

Malay cultural memory, safeguarded by Malay arts practitioners and religious teachers alike, holds that as Hadhrami Arab traders traveled through the Straits of Melaka in the 14th and 15th centuries, they frequented towns on the banks of Sumatra's major rivers. In the public marketplaces of littoral (*hulu*, or upstream) towns, foreign Arab Muslims gathered to socialize amongst themselves and mingle with local populations. According to oral histories of this cultural exchange, these foreign Muslim men sang, played music, and danced an energetic dance, one that is remembered today as *al-zafn*. As traveling Arabs continued their mercantile journeys, the basic elements of *al-zafn* also traveled and were introduced to most of maritime Southeast Asia, accounting for the multitude of dance styles that claim this shared cultural history across the islands of Southeast Asia today, albeit under different names.³⁴¹ At the same time that *zapin* crossed the waters of maritime Southeast Asia, the tradition also moved inland (*hilir*, or downstream). *Zapin* was carried from the boisterous public markets into the heartland of the Malay cultural milieu where it encountered the established Malay sultanates.

³⁴⁰ Jean Lambert, "Music in the Arabian Peninsula. An Overview.," ed. Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds, *The Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music* 6 (2002): 652.

³⁴¹ If considering the variations known to my interlocutors alone, there is *berdana/bedana* in Lampung, *zafin* in Java, *jepin* in Kalimantan, *jippeng* or *balumpa* in different parts of Sulawesi, and *dana-dani* in the Nusa Tenggara islands. *Zapin* appears to be the most commonly known name for the dance form in most of Sumatra, peninsular Malaysia, and Singapore. Anecdotally, I heard of a form of the dance called, very simply, *satu* ("one"), which is in reference to *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet and the introductory footwork step in *zapin*.

All accounts of Malay *zapin* indicate that this music and dance form functioned historically as *dakwah* (loosely defined as proselytization), as a means through which information about Islam, Islamic practice, and culture was shared amongst a non-Muslim or newly converted Muslim community. Stories say that the lute player sang tales about the Prophet Muhammad and preached the Pillars of Islam, whilst dancers demonstrated proper stature and body positions in prayer.³⁴² As *zapin* was embraced into the Malay sultanates, Malay aesthetics were folded into movements coded as Islamic, effectively localizing Islam to suit the geography and culture of the Malay world. Imported instruments – *oud* (a lute which evolved from the South Arabian *qanbûs*), *mirwâs* (small frame drum), and Arabic vocals – evolved into their Malay counterparts – *gambus*, *marwas*, and Malay *syair* vocals. Footwork based on *alif* served as a reminder of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God), while arm positions represented the control and refinement of Malay *sopan santun* (courteousness and respect).

Arms, which may have been raised high above the shoulders in an Arab *zapin* in the marketplace, were lowered when entering the sultanates. This lowered position reduced any potential threat or perceived aggression typically associated with elevated arms in *pencak silat*, Malay martial arts that are fought either bare-handed or with hand-held weapons. To prevent the accidental exposure of skin, some elders remember holding their shirt sleeves at the wrist between their fingers as they danced, so as to keep the loose fabric from slipping up their arm.³⁴³ In some styles, the left hand remains stationary while dancing; bent at the elbow with fingers wrapped in an upturned fist, the left arm symbolically represents the *beban*, or burden, of upholding one's culture and living in accordance with Islamic principles. This left arm functions as an anchor for

³⁴² Interview with Datu Arzul Jamaan; Interview with Syafrizaldi, interview by Katia Chaterji, September 19, 2019; Interview with Dr. O.K. Nizami Jamil, interview by Katia Chaterji, December 7, 2019.

³⁴³ Interview with Dr. O.K. Nizami Jamil.

the dancer, as it remains unmoving, pressed close to the core of the body while the right arm moves at the wrist to accompany any footwork, tracing the *alif* into the earth with various embellishments. In other stories, this stationary arm position is a gesture leftover from when worshippers would carry their prayer mats, *tikar*, draped over their arm on the way to the mosque. Tom Ibnur's *Zafn al-Zafn*, which debuted in 2016 at Jakarta's Taman Ismail Marzuki, rendered this symbolism of the *tikar* in *zapin* on stage. In addition to his emphasis on audible footwork (as discussed earlier), each dancer draped a *tikar* over their left arm to carry it onto the stage, laid it along the stage floor, and proceeded to dance atop it. Stories say that one's skill as a *zapin* dancer is determined by whether one can dance atop a prayer mat without moving or sliding it along the floor.³⁴⁴ The *beban* of upholding Malay culture as the anchor around which one dances, the weight of the (now imaginary) *tikar*, and the self-control required to dance without agitating the carpet underneath one's feet all merge together in a symbol of Malay Islamic piety (see figure 4.1).

The performing arts form that became what is called *zapin* today (or any of its alternate regional names) is a product of the trans-oceanic trade and migration that, using threads of Muslim solidarity and a shared cultural language of Islamic significance, wove together distant parts of the Indian Ocean world in the centuries that followed Islam's developments after 622 CE.³⁴⁵ Today, *zapin* is an intangible reminder of shared roots, routes, and cultural symbolism within the fabric of global Muslim togetherness. At the same time, *zapin* is a representation, one that is ephemeral and routinely performed, of the claim that Malay authority holds on the making of local Islam. In *zapin* we witness the mutual reinforcement between Malayness and Islam – one does not exist without the other. To understand this, we turn to the historical processes of Islamization and the important

³⁴⁴ For a video of this performance, see: *Tari Melayu Zapin Al Zaffan (Telisik Tari Melayu)*.

³⁴⁵ Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History*, New Oxford World History (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands below the Winds*.

functions of *dakwah* – proselytization – to contain, communicate, and spread Islamic values across oceans and along rivers to arrive in a place like central Sumatra.

Figure 4.1: Syafrizaldi, a dancer, demonstrates the basic stance in *zapin*: the left arm is held parallel to the ground with a loose fist; the right arm is positioned lower to the ground and moves along with the body. This steady left arm position represents the *beban* (burden) of upholding Malay culture and it also serves as an anchor around which the body moves. This left arm position is also a reminder of a prayer mat draped over the forearm.

Source: Katia Chaterji



II.II. Islamization and the Formation of the Islamic

When the Prophet Muhammad inaugurated the Muslim era in 622 CE, Islam underwent significant social and jurisprudential development in response to a growing Muslim population.³⁴⁶

After the Prophet's death, independent scholars of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), known as *mujtahids*, formed *madhhabs* (communities) around their scholarly interpretation of Islam,³⁴⁷ training

³⁴⁶ In 622 CE, the Prophet and his close companion Abu Bakr fled persecution in Mecca to continue practicing their faith in Medina. This journey, known as the Hijrah, also marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. For more on the Prophet's life, see: Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, Past Masters (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 19–20.

³⁴⁷ While it is accepted amongst most Muslims that there is only one *shari'a* (divine command), it is equally understood that there is no single person capable of grasping God's true meaning. It is important to recognize the distinction, then, between *shari'a* as divine command and *fiqh* as jurisprudence subject to individual, and variable, human interpretations. Within Islamic mysticism or Sufism (Ar: *tasawwuf*), *shari'a* is also the first of four levels of mystical learning that lead to knowing oneself – and in knowing oneself, one knows God. In this understanding, *shari'a* represents the outward behavior of Islamic teachings, or the physical path, and is followed by *tariqa/tarekat* (Ar/BI: the spiritual path), *haqiqa/hakikat* (Ar/BI: mystical truth), and *marifat/makrifat* (Ar/BI: final mystical knowledge). These four paths are sometimes called the Four Doors of Sufism. See: Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad : The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014); Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964).

students who later journeyed eastward along newly opened routes traversing the Indian Ocean. As Muslims began to travel beyond the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic landscape broadened to include much of the Middle East, North and East Africa, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia.

The geographical spread of Islam as a legal, cultural, and religious system is commonly referred to as the process of Islamization; however, as historian Andrew Peacock writes, the exact meaning of Islamization, despite the frequent use of the term by scholars of Islam, remains contested.³⁴⁸ Because the processes at work for Islamization to take place and the resulting socio-religious configuration varies tremendously between global regions and cultures, Islamization hardly indicates a neat process replicated across all regions of the newly formed Islamic world. Rather, Islamization suggests a complex series of interactions between distinct processes of Arabization, vernacularization, conversion, demographic change, and more broadly the spread of Muslim culture.³⁴⁹ Islamization, thus, reflects a multitude of meanings and unique processes that are simultaneously acknowledged as Islamic (global) yet distinctly cultural (local).

In early scholarship of Islam, definitions of Islam and the Islamic were tethered to a Christian conceptualization of conversion as a fixed, defined, and often abrupt event.³⁵⁰ Given the history of scholarship on Islam as the product of European colonial scholarship on the Other (on Muslim subjects of Christian empires), these resources translated Islam into recognizable units for European readers. Sir Thomas Arnold's description of Islam as a "missionary religion" in 1896 contributed greatly to global representations of Islam distributed under the veil of colonialism.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Peacock, *Islamisation*.

³⁴⁹ Peacock, 4.

³⁵⁰ Nehemia Levtzion's *Conversion to Islam* from 1979 was the first compilation of comparative global Islam, but it is still bound to Christianity's sticky understanding of conversion as a fixed and abrupt experience. See: Nehemia Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979).

³⁵¹ Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1896), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.ah59hj>.

Also in the late 19th century, Snouck Hurgronje studied and wrote extensively about Islam in the Dutch East Indies, going so far as to enter Mecca under the false pretense of converting to Islam, in his capacity as “Advisor for Native Affairs” to the Dutch.³⁵² Hurgronje’s efforts clearly expose the strategies employed by European empires to study a culture in order to subjugate the people. In Southeast Asia, this is reflected in colonial writing that maps Islam onto a Christianized landscape of conversion (a “missionary” tradition that can make swift converts, as Hurgronje demonstrated for them) and in colonial efforts to render Islam unthreatening to the mission of exploitation colonialism (simultaneously minimizing Islam’s local importance and prioritizing the Hindu-Buddhist foundation of many Southeast Asian cultures).

As a result of such strategies in colonial scholarship, Islamic cultures were depicted as coming into being through proselytization, or missionary Islam. The Arabic word *da‘wa* (دعوة), from the classical root meaning “to call” or “to invite,” is most often translated as proselytization or propagation of the faith.³⁵³ Yet *da‘wa* does not necessarily indicate conversion amongst non-Muslims – in fact, *da‘wa* reflects a process of sharing information about Islam to encourage individual conversion, perhaps, but more likely to “[summon] other Muslims to correct forms of belief.”³⁵⁴ And because the means through which individuals preached about Islam varied tremendously from region to region, the assumed symmetry between conversion events and Islamization remains problematic.

³⁵² In the Hijaz (the birthplace of Islam in modern western Saudi Arabia), Hurgronje was among the earliest European Orientalists to document Arab music, particularly the region’s wedding music. Given that one of the possible origins for the Malay term “zapin” is the Arabic *zafana* (زفن : to dance at a wedding), we can speculate that Hurgronje may have encountered a dance form that influenced the dancing practices of the eastern ridge of the Indian Ocean. After this journey, Hurgronje deposited a *qanbûs*, identified as a South Arabian lute, in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.

³⁵³ Canard, “Da‘wa.”

³⁵⁴ Peacock, *Islamisation*, 5.

Perhaps a clearer approach to questions of Islamization, conversion, and *da'wa* is to ask what it means to identify as “Islamic.” Shahab Ahmed takes this approach to problematize the assumptions we hold surrounding religion and culture that prompt the label of “Islamic” or its unflattering inverse, “unislamic.” Ahmed comments that descriptions of Islam and the Islamic tend to play into the binary of reductive essentialism or imprecise pluralism. The former requires a “core” or “essence” of Islam that may not in reality be applicable to all identifying Muslims, while the latter takes refuge in the vast diversity of Islamic practice but lacks precision in understanding what about such practices makes them Islamic. Ahmed favors a conversation of difference within Islam, exposing rather than hiding the ambiguities and contradictions that make up “the structure and dynamic of human and historical Islam.”³⁵⁵ In doing so, Ahmed views diversity (and diversity within Islam) not as tolerance of difference, but instead as the ability to coexist alongside seemingly contradictory interpretations of Islam.

The music and dance tradition of *zapin*, which is routinely characterized as an Islamic Malay art form and a vestige of Arab trade and migration through the Malay World, is wrapped into a layered understanding of Islamic culture. To understand what makes *zapin* Islamic, let us consider Ahmed’s textual framework. For Ahmed, the pre-text, text, and con-text of so-called Islamic traditions aid our understanding of its presumed Islamic-ness. The reality or lived experience of a tradition (the pre-text), the written or performed content of that particular tradition (the text), and the community that the tradition involves (the con-text) must be understood together. The text requires mediation of its pre-text and con-text in order to make sense of its Islamic meaning. If *zapin* represents a textual tradition of Riau’s performative Islamization, its pre-textual experience (participating in and witnessing *zapin* performance) and its contextual community

³⁵⁵ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 345.

(Malay cultural norms) together produce and configure *zapin* as an Islamic art form by and for Malay Muslims. Expectations placed upon *zapin* practitioners to conform to notions of appropriateness in effect expose the Malay values of its pretext and context, not the universal Islamic values that the textual tradition promotes through its performance. This logic posits that it is *zapin*'s Malayness that makes *zapin* Islamic: *tak Melayu tak Islam*.

Many things take place in the performance of *zapin*. Choreographers, practitioners, musicians, and the participatory community of observers and aficionados inscribe Islamic-ness into a foundation of Malayness, and vice versa. They mutually reinforce one another. Core values of Malay dance, and particularly of *zapin*, are interchangeable with Islamic ones: modesty, outwardly visible through costuming and internalized via body position, eye gaze, and awareness of the feet; humility, as performers ask permission and seek forgiveness at the start and finish of their dancing, showing their respect simultaneously for God, the local Malay ruler, and/or esteemed guests (*raja sehari*, or “king for the day”),³⁵⁶ and *tawhid* (the absolute Oneness of God), as embodied in representations of *alif* (first letter in the Arabic alphabet and a symbol of *tawhid*) in footwork, arms, and body positioning.

This visceral synonymy between Malay and Islamic values is layered upon *zapin*'s origin story of Arab Muslim traders bringing music, dance, and religion (along with their wares) to the islands of maritime Southeast Asia. *Zapin* is a performing arts tradition that not only reminds the Malay community of their unique localization of Islam but that also exists as a remnant from past Islamization. Representing an art form deemed “ancient” in this way, performing artists take on the responsibility of upholding the cultural heritage legacy leftover from early Muslim ancestors. But this, as with all dance preservation efforts, is a fraught task. Dance, just like its dancers, is

³⁵⁶ Interview with Tengku Indraputra, interview by Katia Chaterji, September 19, 2019.

constantly in motion – between bodies and temporalities, dance shifts to adapt to its hosts, changing naturally as it is passed from generation to generation. What remains are our stories about origins. The movements themselves do not preserve the exact behaviors of dancers in the 15th century, as if dancers are precise replicas of their teachers. Instead, movements that remain part of *zapin* carve these stories about origins, connectivity, and culture into the ground and air through which the dancer moves. *Zapin* is a symbolic acknowledgement of historical Arab Muslim trade networks that also provides a meaningful space for dancers of each generation to interpret these stories in connection with the demands of the social and cultural lives they live.

Historical material, which includes that which is passed down via embodied and oral traditions, is therefore constructive, not reconstructive, as individual moving parts, audiences, contexts, and references necessarily change over time. “Each reconstruction of historical dance inevitably constructs the cultural act it means to replicate,” writes dance scholar and choreographer Mark Franko. “Reconstruction is an act that actually implies, although it may internally reject, multiple distancing.”³⁵⁷ Franko moves away from the pressures to simulate or replicate something as it was (may have been) performed in the past, and instead advocates for dance choreography that may be experienced as both unique and historical at once for contemporary audiences. This perspective generates new possibilities of understanding *zapin* as a construction of the Islamic within Malay contexts. *Zapin* exists as an ephemeral construction of Islam’s history in the Malay world, one that both speaks to historical Islamization as well as to the contemporary social value of the Islamic on everyday Malay life. The next section discusses the meaning and implications of performing Islam, and it is followed in Part III by three unique performances that each highlight

³⁵⁷ Mark Franko, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*, 2nd ed. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2015), 150.

the variable ways in which Islamic narratives are constructed to achieve the seemingly contradictory dynamic of novel *and* historical.

II.III. Performing the Islamic

Amin Sweeney, a philologist best known for his work on Malay oral traditions, writes that we – as literates – are always already entangled in “the prison house of language.”³⁵⁸ Writing within the academy and for academic audiences, we privilege print-literacy and struggle to communicate non-written sources on *their* terms. The disciplining of knowledge in the academy generates tremendous resistance to communicating non-textual material in anything other than print-literate terms. Learning to speak and think “in oral” is a challenge at constant odds with the scholar’s need to analyze and annotate. This “prison house of language” and literacy is visible in the field of Islamic studies, where scholarship regularly privileges textual and written traditions within Islam’s institutionalized or politicized forms. Yet many scholars in this field have begun to grapple with the uncodified, non-textual aspects of Islam, opening up considerations of the performing arts within Islamic practice.

Timothy Daniels’ work exemplifies academic consideration of performance within Islamic cultures in Southeast Asia. Daniels’ focus on piety – the ways individuals involved in the arts (via production, consumption, and mediation) engage, negotiate, and contest notions of normative piety as coded by religious and political figures – is particularly generative because it explores the concept of agency.³⁵⁹ The arts, artists, and arts supporters cannot exist at the sidelines of socio-

³⁵⁸ Amin Sweeney, *Malay Word Music: A Celebration of Oral Creativity* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, 1994), xii. See also: Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton Essays in Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

³⁵⁹ Timothy Daniels, ed., *Performance, Popular Culture, and Piety in Muslim Southeast Asia* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

politico-religious debates; instead, they are at the center of negotiating and contesting what it means to be (and look) Muslim in the public sphere. Daniels' consideration of *dangdut*'s dancing icon, Inul Daratista, explores how her individual agency is a site of contestation across clerics who, taking offense in her legendary hip gyrations, issued a fatwa against her performance and politicians who supported her performance as an expression of her civil liberties.³⁶⁰ Such work explores normative and divergent pieties that are necessarily mediated through performance in the public sphere, popular culture, and media representation.

This kind of engagement with Islamic representation in the performing arts builds upon the work of critical dance scholars who shifted the field in the latter 20th century. Prior to the 1970s, scholars of dance and music understood "culture" as synonymous with "high art," a reflection of the European ideological paradigm of classical/folk.³⁶¹ Such emphasis prioritized documentation of dance and choreography through the lens of Western music/dance theory, with minimal consideration of the individual dancing body. In response to the overwhelming Eurocentricity of this position, scholars have since refocused on the "techniques of the body" as shared cultural knowledge.³⁶² Since the 1970s, dance scholars have meticulously emphasized the body, culture, and embodiment, inspiring Allegra Fuller Snyder's understanding of dance as a "way of knowing."³⁶³ In the mid-1980s, Cynthia Novack Bull centralized the body even further in considering movement *as* culture, and more recently Tomie Hahn argues that the body is situated by sensorial orientations that inscribe culture, a process she traces through dance transmission in

³⁶⁰ Timothy Daniels, "Social Drama, Dangdut and Popular Culture," in *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Routledge, 2009), 99–112.

³⁶¹ For a discussion of this trend, see Buckland, *Dancing from Past to Present*; Holt, *Art in Indonesia*; and Sumarsam, *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java*.

³⁶² Foster, *Choreographing History*; Mauss, "Les Techniques Du Corps."

³⁶³ Snyder, "The Dance Symbol."

the classroom/studio and the sensational connections that make props like a fan become extensions of the dancer's arm.³⁶⁴

The shift in dance scholarship towards embodiment and embodied culture suggests that performance is a valuable site to understand how people make sense of their lives, communities, and the past. This awareness and expansion of potential archives includes the body as a meaningful place to think beyond text-centric knowledge systems. Such a function rejects understandings of dance traditions as static.³⁶⁵ Instead, as Susan Leigh Foster argues, dancers are always in the process of reinterpretation, juggling the preservation of knowledge passed down over generations with the necessary adaptations to different bodies and social demands.³⁶⁶ Yet the embrace of the body in performance equally provides the means to regulate gender ideologies, those seemingly rigid systems of behavior within a socially constructed binary that provides the language to code individuals and their actions as “normative” or “deviant.”³⁶⁷ As the dancing body is opened to deeper consideration, so too are the social rules governing, evaluating, and guiding gendered behavior.

Musical behavior is an arena regulated by socialized ideals of gender and sexuality that at the same time provides the means of reinforcing, defining, and/or subverting one's gender.³⁶⁸ This dynamic is visible in the Indonesian performing arts, where many traditions also carry the weight of bearing Islamic ideals of ethics, aesthetics, and identity on regional and national scales. Those traditions attributed to *dakwah* in any way, like *zapin*, exemplify an “Islamic flavor” (*islami*, or

³⁶⁴ Bull, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*; Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*.

³⁶⁵ Foster, *Reading Dancing*, 12.

³⁶⁶ Foster, *Choreographing History*, 4.

³⁶⁷ A more detailed consideration of gender can be found below in Part III, section 3 titled “Contesting Gendered Islam.”

³⁶⁸ Koskoff, “From Women to Gender,” 40.

yang bernafas Islam) that quickly becomes guarded as the number of practitioners increases.³⁶⁹ Gatekeeping becomes a serious concern when traditions that historically restricted female participation become available to female practitioners. In Sumatra, *zapin* is known as an historically male-dominant music and dance form that has only recently accepted women into its fold. That is not to say that women were not part of *zapin* spaces in earlier periods – stories do exist of *zapin wanita* (women’s *zapin*) that was practiced in private, and women provided food, shelter, and childcare during festivities where men enjoyed and took part in *zapin*.³⁷⁰ Yet it was not until the 1980s (possibly 1970s) that women in Indonesia began to publicly enter *zapin* learning, creation, and performance spaces, as evidenced by the experiences of female dancers I interviewed and their own learning landscapes in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁷¹

During Suharto’s New Order (1965-98), Indonesia’s regional arts academies embarked on new projects to codify, stratify, and nationalize the arts in response to Suharto’s ongoing societal reform (*perkembangan*). The results of such projects undeniably silenced the voices, bodies, and styles of traditional artists who were labeled as threats to Suharto’s military dictatorship regime. Assumptions about a connection between the artistic community and the communist Left led to dangerous living circumstances for many performing artists who were pressured to suppress their past affiliations and conform to State-approved music and dance, often promoting State activities.³⁷² At the same time, the opening of the arts academies to women under the New Order provided an opportunity for some women to break into traditions previously closed off to them, all

³⁶⁹ Kartomi, *Musical Journeys in Sumatra*, 2012.

³⁷⁰ Interview with Riowan, interview by Katia Chaterji, September 19, 2019.

³⁷¹ Mohd Anis’ work shows that women were visible in *zapin* spaces from the 1940s onward in Malaysia and Singapore, most notably in the film industry. This visibility of women in *zapin* abroad very likely influenced Indonesian practitioners, though female participation in Indonesia took place in the arts academies much later. See: Mohd Anis Md Nor, *Zapin, Folk Dance of the Malay World*, South-East Asian Social Science Monographs (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁷² See Larasati, *Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Postgenocide Indonesia*.

the while negotiating New Order restrictions on individual expression. The Malay Islamic arts became one such venue for many female artists to learn, perform, and experiment with choreography for the first time.

My dance instructors at ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia) Padangpanjang, all female, share similar pathways into the professionalized performing arts.³⁷³ They began their undergraduate study at Padangpanjang in the 1980s, when the campus was under its former title ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia) Padangpanjang. Given the campus' location tucked away in the West Sumatran mountains, the institution boasts special focus on Minangkabau traditions (*randai*, *talempong*, and *tari piring* to name a few), but it also exposes students to more general Malay arts from across Sumatra and the Malay world (*orkes Melayu*, *tari Melayu*, and *tari zapin* among others). My instructors' Minang identity was layered with a deep sense of Malay belongingness. They all spoke of their dedication to foundational Malay arts (*tertarik kepada Melayu, basiknya Melayu*), a tradition that adheres to strict gender roles in performance on the basis of cultural ethics (*etika budaya Melayu*) that is visible in gendered choreography, body posture, mood/feeling, and costuming.³⁷⁴

Ibu Adjuoaktoza (Ibu Il, for short) had always wanted to specialize in *tari zapin*, and when I met her in 2019 she was the primary (and only) *zapin* instructor in the dance department at ISI-Padangpanjang. When she first began learning *zapin* in 1986, she believed that women had already been dancing *zapin* for quite some time; however, she did not encounter older female *zapin* dancers in her own training and she was never taught by another woman. Her teachers were always men. By the mid-1980s, a perception of *zapin* as embracing of women was already widely accepted, but

³⁷³ My primary Malay dance teachers included: Ibu Adriana Gusti, Ibu Indriyetti, and Ibu Adjuoaktoza Rovylendes.

³⁷⁴ Interview with Adjuoktoza Rovylendes, interview by Katia Chaterji, January 17, 2020; Interview with Adriana Gusti, interview by Katia Chaterji, June 18, 2019.

actual female participation in the public sphere was still emergent. Ibu Il believes (a belief expressed to me by numerous individuals) that the shift in *zapin*'s functionality from religious *dakwah* to entertainment is what enabled the entry of women into performance spaces.³⁷⁵ This may be indicative of the tremendous shifts in the performing arts during the New Order to organize festivals and promote a curated image of the Indonesian arts nationally and abroad. As dances like *zapin* came under consideration for large-scale festivals and competitions, women were increasingly invited to enter such performances to add entertainment value.

As dances shifted in function towards entertainment, styles were increasingly represented on stage as *kreasi* (new creation), instead of *tradisi* (traditional). Because *zapin* was considered *kreasi* by the time that Ibu Il started learning, her participation and eventual leadership in the production of *zapin* was accepted as an important step in the dance style's *perkembangan* (development) – but women like Ibu Il are careful not to consider their work as *zapin* “preservation” (the *tradisi*). Despite this acknowledgement of new life and innovation in *zapin*, its origin story – of Islamization, Arab migration, and Malay localization – remains of upmost importance in the teaching and performance of the dance (*yang penting, tidak merubah...tidak melanggar ketentuan ketentuan yang dulunya / what's important is not to change the dance...not to violate the conventions that came before*). Female *zapin* practitioners may feel like their work is *kreasi*, but they continue to hold themselves to the standards of *tradisi*. Despite expressed efforts to preserve previous standards in the art form, women in *zapin* are always a part of creating anew. This is possibly because *zapin*'s origin story does not make space for women in performance. Their recent participation is accepted but their performance must be nominally distinct from that which is classified as tradition.

³⁷⁵ Interview with Adjuoktoza Rovylendes.

Islamic performing arts, those that were historically male, have in the last several decades rescripted choreography to map onto a normative gender binary. *Zapin* is a compelling illustration of this process. The various configurations of gender in *zapin* performance reveal a variety of reactions due to vibrant discussions of Islam, Malay culture, and representation of chosen identity. The following section presents three performances of *zapin* in distinct contexts to highlight the ways in which *zapin* enables practitioners to embody tradition, assert a new sense of belonging, and challenge the heteronormative gender binary. Despite their differences, the following performances together shed light on how (and which) Islamic ideas are communicated and experienced via the performing arts and what it means for performing artists to contribute to historical memory production and to make meaning of Muslim identities.

III. ZAPIN PERFORMED

III.I. Maintaining Tradition: A *Zapin Tradisi*

Act One

I arrived in Siak Sri Indrapura on a hazy September afternoon, the dusty air clinging to my clothes and seeping past my mask after the two-hour journey from Pekanbaru, the capital city of Riau Province. In the thick of *musim asap*—the seasonal atmospheric haze that descends each year due to widespread agricultural burning³⁷⁶—I exit the car by the front steps of a bright yellow building constructed in the traditional Malay house style. Pak Riowan, a man in his forties dressed in formal attire, greets us and leads us to the entrance of Lembaga Adat Melayu. We shed our sandals and climb the customary five steps to emerge into a large, empty room with painted yellow

³⁷⁶ This is a controversial issue between different types of farmers and big agriculture. Anthropologist Sophie Chao writes beautifully of the human and more-than-human interactions in the face of lethal capital in the palm industry in Sumatra and West Papua. See: Sophie Chao, "Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector," *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 421–46; Sophie Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* (London: Duke University Press, 2022).

walls, decorative green rugs lining the floor in between four octagonal pillars in the center of the room, suggesting a stage.³⁷⁷

We are escorted to the back of the carpeted area where we sit sideways on the floor with feet tucked underneath. Riowan leaves us to join a group of youths, all secondary school age, and dressed in traditional Malay attire. The boys wear yellow loose trousers and long-sleeved tunics in the style of *baju Melayu*, a checkered *samping* tied around the waist that falls just above the knees (indicating unmarried status), and a smaller cut of sarong folded and wrapped around their heads to form a *tengkolok*. Seven girls wear maroon *baju kurung* with white trim and matching white chiffon head coverings fastened in a style typical of Malay school uniforms (see figure 4.2). Riowan nods to Pak Muhammad Ali, an elder *gambus* player and singer who leads five boys playing *marwas* (small frame drums). With Ali's return nod in acknowledgment, Riowan leads the group of girls onto the central rug; they follow in line bent slightly forward, with the right hand extended towards the floor in a gesture of humble respect as the group crosses in front of me and the other spectators before turning to face the front of the room. Palms pressed together in *sembah*, the dancers bow and then kneel, their right knees resting on the floor. Recognizing this cue, I scramble in my bag for my notebook; the performance is about to begin.

Pak Ali strums the *gambus*, shaping the opening notes typical of the Malay stringed lute. A veil of melancholy drapes over the room, and I am struck by a memory of a teacher describing the *gambus* to me as an instrument of solitude.³⁷⁸ Malay fishermen, who could spend days or even weeks alone in their boats waiting for a good catch, would bring along their *gambus* for comfort and to accompany their singing. Considering the *gambus* instrument itself is widely viewed as a

³⁷⁷ A unique feature to Malay traditional architecture, the five steps are a spatial representation of the five pillars of Islam. Octagonal pillars are also significant.

³⁷⁸ Interview with Datu Arzul Jamaan.

reflection of the shape of a woman's body, it is clear that the relationship between the *gambus* and its player is one of solitude and affection. In this echoey room at Lembaga Adat Melayu, Pak Ali begins this *lagu zapin* (*zapin* song) alone. Those first few moments, when Pak Ali closes his eyes and quietly plucks his *gambus*, bring into focus a vision of still ocean waters and homesick fishermen. Before long, Pak Ali begins to sing: *Assalamualaikum, Assalamualaikum kami ucapkan* (Assalamualaikum, we say in greeting). The end of his first line is punctuated by the five *marwas* players who chime in for the chorus, "*kami ucapkan*," as they begin to play their instruments. The sharp slap of their drums jolts me out of my reverie, and the dancers too respond to this audible cue and rise from their kneeled position, right toe planted next to their left foot to prime them for their first step, *alif*.

The seven female dancers had formed two lines across the green carpet, with Pak Riowan and his assistant teacher (also male) standing in front, leading them. They are young, secondary school students, and they appear very shy at first. But as they continue to follow Riowan's lead, they begin to loosen and soften, and I catch them sneaking smiles and glances at one another throughout their performance. Their movements are small and controlled, and it is sometimes difficult to trace their footwork precisely because the hems of their *baju kurung* obscure their feet. Yet I can determine the direction of their steps by the fluid movements of their right arms, which sway in small circles at hip height, like an oar directing the body's movement. The left arms are held still, hand closed in an upward turned fist, as a reminder of *beban*, duty, and mindful prayer. They take small steps, careful not to lift their feet above their ankle, and their movements carry them forward and backward, gestures contained within the rectangular space each dancer traces on the carpet.

The dancers move through *alif*, adding embellishments similar to those I witnessed with Wadah Seni Melayu in Pekanbaru, but always returning to *alif* to link their movements and start a new step. As the *marwas* players amplify their sound by adding onto their complex rhythms, the dancers appear to sway a little, adding some playful fluidity to their dancing. As the drums reach the peak of their crescendo, they begin the close by initiating *tahto*, a rhythmic pattern repeated three times that signals to the dancers and the audience that the piece will end. The dancers respond by pairing an *alif* half-step and a kneeling *sembah* position, standing up to repeat the set three times to the beat of the *marwas*. With the final *tum* of the drums, the dancers bow forward in *sembah* a little deeper. Following Riowan's lead, they stand and exit the carpeted performance area, bending slightly forward and extending their right hands towards the floor in respect as they cross the stage on their way out.

Figure 4.2: Young students of Sanggar Balairung Sri in Siak Sri Indrapura regency, performing at Lembaga Adat Melayu, 2019.

Source: Katia Chaterji



Act Two

These dancers study with Sanggar Balairung Sri under the guidance of Pak Riowan. Coming from a family of traditional musicians, Riowan teaches solely in the *zapin Siak* style. This style of *zapin* emerged in and around the sultanate palace of Siak Sri Indrapura in the eastern part of Riau province, along the banks of the Siak River. The Siak style is easily recognizable because it is considered the most *tegang* (stiff), meaning a Siak dancer tends to stand taller (more upright) and their feet barely lift off the ground when they move. This rigid posture is striking in comparison with the Johor style popularized by Tom Ibnur, where dancers keep their bodies lower to the ground and their feet fly off the ground as they leap. Ibu Duni Sriwani, a *zapin* dancer who teaches traditional Siak as well as other styles in Pekanbaru, was taught when she was young that these stylistic differences mirror the environmental conditions of the surrounding Malay community.³⁷⁹ In Siak Sri Indrapura, the still and quiet features of the Siak River make for smaller, unassuming gestures. In contrast, Johor's sea-facing location influences its dancing style in more dynamic ways, just like the ocean's waves. All movements in *zapin* flow like water (*semua mengalir seperti air*), Sriwani tells me. But it matters whether that water is a river or an ocean – stylistic differences in *zapin* are a response to the varying cultural and environmental conditions that surround Malay communities in Southeast Asia. Malay *zapin* directly reflects the diversity amongst and across Malay ethnic communities.

Sriwani's husband, Iwan Irawan, characterized Malay dance as an internal dance (*tari Melayu itu tari dalaman*), one that is focused on the inner spirit (*pada batin*). Despite significant variation, all gestures within the *zapin* styles must reflect this internal quality. One way that Iwan teaches students to remember the internal dance is by focusing attention inward on the body's three

³⁷⁹ Interview with Iwan Irawan and Duni Sriwani, interview by Katia Chaterji, December 8, 2019.

parts: the torso (*liuk*), the arms (*igal*), and the feet (*kaki*). All three parts must move distinctly on their own, demanding concentration and patience.³⁸⁰ Young *zapin* learners who are impatient to perform in the public sphere often rush through this training and blend together these three arenas of bodily movement. Doing so is a telltale sign for *zapin* instructors that their students need to slow down and practice articulating each gesture.

Riowan's Sanggar Balairung Sri is often lauded for its attention to tradition and core *zapin* values. The slow and mindful movements of his dancers are representative of this care for tradition, and Riowan understands his work as an effort to preserve tradition.³⁸¹ The focus on *batin* in Riowan's sanggar is visible in the relatively stiff body position that separates the three body arenas (*liuk*, *igal*, *kaki*) and in the loose fist hand position symbolizing *tawhid*. Other elements of tradition in Riowan's Siak style exemplify the Malay value of *sopan santun* (courteousness and respect). The Sultanate of Siak in Siak Sri Indrapura, situated roughly 60 kilometers downstream from the head of the Siak River, was among the first sultanates to modify *zapin* to take on qualities valued by the Malay sultanate while, at the same time, retaining the stories and messages of Islam, vestiges of *zapin*'s Hadhrami origins. To be appropriately performed in front of the sultan and other elites, *zapin* underwent processes of refinement to make room for the expression of Malay *sopan santun*.

As *zapin* transformed into its Malay form, individual gestures were interrogated to ensure that they reflected Malay understandings of *sopan santun*. This included the height of a dancer's arms, not too high so as to expose any skin or to be seen as a threat to the Sultan. *Sopan santun* is also represented through a dancer's restricted body positioning, as a performer must avoid turning their back directly to the sultan or other esteemed guests. This means that many *zapin* movements

³⁸⁰ Interview with Iwan Irawan and Duni Sriwani.

³⁸¹ Interview with Riowan.

allow for walking backwards or sideways to change directions, instead of a 180 degree turn to face behind. The traditional instrumentation for *zapin* is led by a *gambus* player/singer and five (typically) *marwas* players. The *gambus* player sings melodic *syairs* in the Malay language on themes of daily life as well as the pillars of Islam. The rhythmic weight of *zapin* is placed on the upbeat: dancers begin on beats eight and three (instead of one and four) in an eight-beat measure.

All the features visible in Sanggar Balairung Sri's performance adhere to the above understandings of the Malay tradition. Despite significant variation across *zapin* styles, the Siak form retains its claim to tradition because it is oriented inward towards slowness, attention to detail, and care – for one's culture and one's religion. It is because of *zapin Siak's* characteristics that scholar-practitioners and policy makers advocate for the introduction of *zapin* in primary and secondary school curricula across Indonesia, not just in the Malay regions. Believing *zapin* to be a critical site of cultural learning, scholars Roza and Zulkifli advocate for mandatory *zapin* instruction from a young age to instill a sense of proper ethics among Indonesia's young citizenry.³⁸² It is in this function of *zapin* to instruct youth in "proper" Islamic behavior that we understand *zapin* as a lens through which normative behavior is coded.

Sanggar Balairung Sri's *zapin tradisi* provides a means for Malay youth to learn Malay ethics and to embody normative Malay traditional values. It also becomes an example of tradition against which other *zapin* styles, regardless of *zapin's* diversity, are assessed on the basis of Malay ethics and aesthetics. Yet this is just one way that *zapin* is taught, performed, and experienced. Returning to Pekanbaru's Riau Islamic Arts Festival from this chapter's opening, we witness another variation on *zapin* that tells a very different story.

³⁸² Roza and Zulkifli, "The Contribution of Zapin as One of Malay Traditional Arts in Curriculum 2013."

III.II. Asserting Islamic Agency: A *Zapin Kreasi*

Act One

On a hazy evening in December 2019, a small dance group local to Pekanbaru, Sanggar BI Production, opened the second night of the Riau Islamic Arts Festival performing what they titled *Zapin Ketoga*. The local government of Riau prides its province as the heartland of Malay culture, and this festival (part of Ruang Kita Festival II) celebrated Riau's deep cultural connection to Islam. In the emcee's opening remarks for the evening, she noted how Malay people believe that Malayness is synonymous with Islam ("Melayu adalah yang identik dengan Islam"). I heard this sentiment countless times over the course of my time in the Malay world. While Malay peoples are diverse geographically and culturally, they are predominantly Muslim.³⁸³ Malay Islamic identity is considered a foundational shared belief amongst a widespread Malay *ummah*, with Islam informing cultural constructions of ethics and desired aesthetics.

As Sanggar BI Production prepared to enter the stage, a group of musicians seated at the back of the stage begin to play. The accordion player sets the mood with a drone and a melancholic violin begins to lead the melody, supported by a double-barreled drum, two *rebana* frame drums, and an acoustic guitar.³⁸⁴ The women dancers don fastened tunics tucked into flowing satin skirts. Each dancer covers her hair tightly with a close-fitted white fabric, on top of which a *fez*-like hat is fastened with an upcast red feather at the front and a long white scarf draping behind. The men dancers wear white satin *baju Melayu*, covering the waist with *samping*, much like the male dancers of Sanggar Balairung Sri in the performance examined previously. Setting these men apart, however, are their loose open jackets and tall red Dervish *sikke*-style hats. The red of their *sikke*,

³⁸³ Islam is a shared belief system amongst most Malay peoples, but not all Malays are Muslim. For more on the development of Malay ethnicity, see: Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree : Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*.

³⁸⁴ The double-barreled drum looks like a West African djun djun in that it is a wooden drum with skin/leather heads that are struck with two sticks or mallets. Unlike the djun djun, this Malay drum is not rope tuned.

adorned with jewels down the front seam, complements the women's red feathers and the red flashes of their skirts (see figure 4.3).

The dancers walk in time with the drumbeats, twirling in a circle around themselves with one arm raised towards the sky reminiscent of Sufi Dervishes. Their stance grounded, the men open both arms towards the sky in a gesture of appeal. Forming two lines, men in front with women behind, the dancers transition to *alif*, the first step in *zapin* that mimics the first Arabic letter *alif* with a basic walking and turn step to form a straight line. A pause in the music...the violinist then passes the lead to the *gambus* player, who begins to pluck the lute dynamically in a melodic embellishment, urging the drummers to keep up with his quickened pace. The dancers take larger and bolder steps, arms and elbows swinging in wide circles. The men even take small athletic leaps, crossing the stage in a playful back and forth with the pulsing accordion.

To a spectator's eye, the aesthetics that Sanggar BI Production employ in their costuming and body movement signal linkages with Moroccan and Turkish traditions. They suggest a foreign, general Arab-ness set to the familiar soundscape of the *orkes Melayu*, the traditional Malay band ensemble replete with accordion, *gambus*, violin/viola, drums, and other instruments as needed. These dancers, in contrast with the young students in Siak Sri Indrapura, take up significantly more space on the stage in their individual movements. Their revelry is evident; faces gleam as the whirling movements make wide rounded shapes out of their flowy clothing. Their dynamic elevated arms, in both the men and women's movements, suggest a boldness that exudes self-confidence. These movements plainly contrast with the aesthetic embodiment of *sopan santun* ethics, typically visible in dancers' low-raised arms, slightly bowed posture, and down-cast eyes. Employing sartorial and choreographic patterns suggestive of something Other, Sanggar BI Production recasts Malay *zapin* performance in an exciting, new, and different way.

Figure 4.3: Sanggar BI Production performing at the Riau Islamic Arts Festival, 2019.

Source: Katia Chaterji



Act Two

After Sanggar BI Production finished their performance, the emcee described their dance item (*Zapin Ketoga*) as one that links Islam in Riau directly to Arab migration. Instead of discussing this sanggar's tendency towards *zapin kreasi* (new creations) over *zapin tradisi* (traditional *zapin* forms), the emcee highlighted *zapin*'s long history of Islamization that connects Riau province to regions as far west as Morocco. In blurring the lines between foreign/Arab Islam and localized Islam within Malay cultural contexts, the Riau Islamic Arts Festival (as vocalized by the emcee) suggests that artistic channels such as *zapin* evidence Riau's heightened cultural proximity to Islam "at the center" of the faith's origins. The Festival promotes the sanggar's move away from traditional Malay aesthetics because this new image suits a representation of Islam in Riau as a distinct process of Arabization, placing Riau closer to the seat of "prestigious" Islam in the Persian Gulf.

Yet this rendition of *zapin* sparked an interesting reaction from a dance elder and esteemed scholar in the community, who remarked to me that Sanggar BI Production's *zapin* was "too influenced" by international dance festivals hosted in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.³⁸⁵ I

³⁸⁵ Interview with Dr. O.K. Nizami Jamil.

understand this sentiment, one shared by most of the older generation of dancers that I consulted during my time in Sumatra, as a comment on the increasing tendency to prioritize “Arab” aesthetics in Indonesia over the last few decades and the role that Middle Eastern Islamic aesthetics take on in shaping Malay Islam’s visual image. This critique of Sanggar BI Production rests in the dancer’s (or more accurately, the choreographer’s) “poor research” in preparing their dance item. It is commonly believed amongst elder dancers that the younger generation is less invested in studying and researching zapin as it has grown as a cultural tradition in the Malay world. This belief minimizes young dancers’ ability to understand tradition and masks an accusation that youth are easily distracted and enraptured by stereotypically “Muslim” attire, music, and movement (coded as non-Malay), as seen in the international Islamic festivals broadcasted throughout the Muslim world. The implication behind this critique is that younger dancers are eager to incorporate foreign elements not due to historical reasoning, but because these elements possess international cultural trend value.

Yet a third response to Sanggar BI Production’s performance is needed to acknowledge the dancers’ nuanced sense of identity, one that does not assume that the sanggar wears layers of Arab-ness to position Riau in direct affinity to the Arab world nor as a result of their inadequate understanding of tradition or untoward interest in *islami* trends. Instead, the dancers perform a display of Arabicized Islam in an effort to assert their own agency as Malay Muslim youth. In appealing to a particular image and geography of Islam through sartorial and choreographic cues, Sanggar BI Production demonstrates knowledge of Islamic aesthetic diversity but chooses to assert their right to meaningfully adapt such symbols into a new, broadened representation of Malay Islam as understood by young performers. Rather than performing Arab-ness, as one might assume at first glance, Sanggar BI Production employs Arab symbols to re-inscribe modern Malayness.

The dancers' performance is an expression of self-justified belonging and being "at home" in the *ummah*.

Several scholars who study performance scenes situate their work on the performance of seeking home and of asserting one's belonging within cultural and geographic spaces. Kareem Khubchandani's work on brown queerness illustrates how Bollywood-themed club events appropriate historically Orientalist aesthetics (such as the uncontextualized bindi or hijab) in an effort to create a new stage for brown bodies to display their brown-ness and create a home for themselves in the diaspora and within the majority white gay nightlife scene.³⁸⁶ Deborah Wong's work on the globalization of Japanese taiko finds that Japan is tacitly accepted as the place of taiko "authenticity," and American players make the journey "back" to Japan to satisfy a neo-Orientalist nostalgia for cultural capital and to infuse their American taiko playing with the essence of tradition that signals Japanese-ness.³⁸⁷ In similar ways, the dancers of Sanggar BI Production re-Orientalize Islam – their mishmash of Middle Eastern attire and mimicry of Bedouin and Sufi dance – in a play to bring Islam "home" to the Riau heartland. They assert a home for themselves and a place for Malayness as part of Islamic world culture.³⁸⁸

Changing historical roles of women's engagement with Islam on social and political levels aids our understanding of Islamic symbols such as attire. Susan Blackburn's work on political Islam in Indonesia reveals that in the precolonial era, women aligned with (and were more accepted in) networks of so-called radical Islamists because the movement was unified in their shared anti-colonial activism and the belief that Islam was a powerful force to overthrow foreign colonizers.

³⁸⁶ Kareem Khubchandani, "Slumdogs and Big Chicks: Unsettling Orientations at Jai Ho!," in *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 108–31.

³⁸⁷ Deborah Wong, "Taiko, Erotics, and Anger," in *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 118–54.

³⁸⁸ Lindsay and Liem, *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965*.

As Indonesia's landscape changed after independence, women were cut out of these same organizations as they adopted new interpretations of Islamic scripture to exclude women.³⁸⁹ As women took on more roles in non-political Islamic groups, they began to express aspirations for a possible Indonesian Islamic modernity through personal choices, such as clothing. Suzanne Brenner argues that women's "conversion" to veiling practices in Java during the New Order reflects changing ideological frameworks that promote a commitment to prescribed Islamic discipline, offering an alternative to traditional femininity and duty under the New Order as well as a model of modernity that is not "Western."³⁹⁰ Annisa Beta continues this discussion of Islamic dress amongst Indonesian Muslim youth in the Reformasi period of the 2000s, arguing in favor of youth as empowered consumers who intelligently take part in global Hijaber fashion.³⁹¹ These scholars emphasize the choices that women make to take charge of their Muslim identities. For *zapin* dancers in Sanggar BI Production, who grew up in Reformasi Indonesia, incorporating attire and behavioral traits that evoke Arab styles is not a product of carelessness or improper education but rather a choice to realign female Muslim identity in modern Indonesia, a new modern identity that is free to be publicly displayed at an event such as the Riau Islamic Arts Festival.

Performances like *zapin* become active sites where particular Islamic identities are written into the bodies and movements of its performers. Sanggar BI Production's *zapin kreasi* illustrates the utility of dance to symbolically communicate belongingness and a refreshed modernity through employed embodiments of Islamic world culture. We travel across the Melaka Strait to Singapore to observe another creative use of *zapin*.

³⁸⁹ Susan Blackburn, "Indonesian Women and Political Islam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore) 39, no. 1 (2008): 83–105.

³⁹⁰ Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and 'The Veil,'" *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996): 673–97.

³⁹¹ Annisa R. Beta, "Hijabers: How Young Urban Muslim Women Redefine Themselves in Indonesia," *The International Communication Gazette* 76, no. 4–5 (2014): 377–89.

III.III. Contesting Gendered Islam: A *Zapin* Across the Water

Act One

Every year, Singaporean dance company Era Dance Theater organizes a 3-day Malay dance festival, called *Muara*, in collaboration with the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay. Free to the public, this community-oriented festival offers workshops, pop-up performances, and nightly entertainment to showcase Malay music and dance groups from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. On a drizzly evening in late October 2019, I stood near the back row of Esplanade's outdoor stage along the city's Marina Bay to watch the second night of *Muara*'s evening performances. Halfway through the night, a contemporary Malay dance group P7:1SMA (read aloud as "Prisma") took to the stage. In P7:1SMA's own words via promotional materials, the company approaches dance as a "strategy" and Malay as a "concept."³⁹² That evening, P7:1SMA's dance item for *Muara* 2019 was titled "Zapin Tunda."

The dancers of P7:1SMA enter the stage with quick steps as their recorded music began to play. An accordion leads the introduction with a fast and bright climbing scale, accompanying four women and four men who enter from opposite sides of the stage. They bend forward slightly at the waist, bowing their chest inward, and extend their right hand down towards the ground in a Malay gesture of respect and humility. The dancers wear matching *baju Melayu* of loose blue trousers and a pale pink tunic, a folded white sarong draped across the left shoulder to rest atop the right hip (see figure 4.4). Men and women alike, the dancers are dressed in simple and modest costume, their fabric cut and tailored to be uniform with one another. The four female dancers do

³⁹² "P7:1SMA Homepage," accessed February 22, 2020, <https://www.p71sma.com/> In a personal communication with me after that evening's performance, P7:1SMA's company manager at the time told me that their intended title and synopsis was: "Zapin Delay / Zapin Tunda. A zapin delayed."

not wear a head covering, and instead leave their hair down or casually fastened at the neck. Neither P7:1SMA's men nor women dancers wear makeup.

Despite appearing on stage in identical unadorned masculine attire, the dancers match up into four mixed-gender pairs, circling their partner slowly before all four pairs form a line on stage left. The accordion stops and its echoes fade. From the silence, a violin takes up a sensuous melody filled with glissando, trills, and wide vibrato, characteristic qualities of the *kamanja*, the Arabic violin. Keeping time is the *rebana*, a kind of *daff* (a generic Arabic term for a frame drum) common in Malay music and used traditionally in sung *dakwah* performances like *zikir rebana*. Between the *dum* and *tak* of the *rebana* and the swaying melody of the violin, the dancers move their feet slowly to the rhythmic structure of traditional *zapin*, playfully emphasizing the upbeat (on beats 8 and 4) with a bounce of the hip and a discrete nod of the head. Their bodies remain humbled slightly forward, their arms sway with control in *lenggang* style – as if they collectively row a boat. Their steps are intentional, their feet low to the ground, lifted just up to the ankle but no more.

As the violin picks up speed over the course of the 5-minute piece, the dancers begin to break out from the space created with their partner and expand their bodies – they leap, jump, and free their arms to sweep and sway at will. Exploring large expressive movements, the dancers individually return at various moments to the controlled and rhythmic *zapin* steps from earlier. As the violin pushes the tempo, the dancers break in and out of perceived control until the music ends with the dancers clumped together on stage left with limbs outstretched in ecstasy.

When P7:1SMA's dancers left the stage, the emcee took up the mic to share her reactions to Zapin Tunda, a reaction that we can plausibly assume mirrored the opinions of the festival organizers, at least, if not also the average audience member. The emcee pointedly remarked that Zapin Tunda was a contemporary shift away from traditional *zapin*, highlighting Zapin Tunda's

un-traditional qualities over any so-called traditional elements. Previous examples (Wadah Seni Melayu's rehearsal in Pekanbaru and Sanggar Balairung Sri's demonstration in Siak) showcased the "traditional" within idealized *zapin* practice: body bent/humbled forward, feet raised just slightly off the ground, arms and wrists *lembut* (soft) and *lenggang* (low swinging), and weight evenly distributed between both feet. In overlooking P7:1SMA's adherence to the tradition in Zapin Tunda (their choice of music, postural attention to the body, feet, arms, and general "feel"), the emcee prioritizes their contemporariness (modern dance body "outbursts" and costuming that, despite being traditional Malay attire, is at odds with normative gender coding). The decision to emphasize the contemporary over the traditional regarding P7:1SMA's performance is striking because it positions P7:1SMA as an outsider to Malay dance – a company whose unexpected composure stands out amongst the items performed by other Malay dance companies. In a community cultural arts festival such as Muara, it is the arts companies who conform to mainstream representations of tradition that form the majority of the event's line-up.

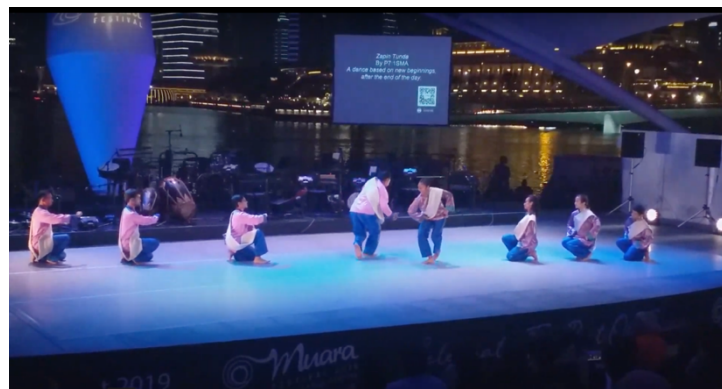
When asked about the emcee's foregrounding of their contemporariness over tradition, a member of P7:1SMA told me that some people are "suspicious" of them when they perform in Malay spaces. They suggested that the group's embrace of modern dance often places them at odds with other stakeholders who guard Malay dance tradition and authenticity. In my subsequent conversations with Malay dancers and teachers, I learned that P7:1SMA's performance was largely considered offensive amongst their group. Rejected by these dance teachers, P7:1SMA and their performance of Zapin Tunda as *zapin* was considered insulting because it appeared as though the dancers were mocking Malay peoples. It was suggested that their performance would have been improved if the dancers had worn make-up, fixed their hair, and made an effort to look as if they had showered. Although some expressed that it may have been better if both the male and the

female dancers dressed in cross-gender clothing, the fact that the women wore masculine clothing was unappreciated.

P7:1SMA's performance provides a unique view into the boundaries of permissibility within Malay Islamic constructions of identity and gender. In electing a masculine Malay aesthetic for all dancers, regardless of assigned gender, P7:1SMA rejects the hetero-normative standards of Malay beauty, specifically that of Malay feminine beauty, in an act that exposes the reliance of most mainstream Malay dance groups on constructed gender behavioral patterns (clothing, posture, facial adornment) within mixed gender or partnered dance. When P7:1SMA performs alongside these groups in a large public festival like Muara, this exposure risks undermining the idealized heteronormativity of proper Malay society (with clearly gendered roles for men and women), especially within a dance space that historically excluded women. This sticky issue influences the way in which P7:1SMA is Othered, marked immediately as contemporary and therefore on the periphery of Malay tradition. Despite P7:1SMA's component parts that exemplify embodied Malay ethics (posture, Malay dress, foot position, rhythm, music), the gender-bending nature of Zapin Tunda crosses an invisible line that renders P7:1SMA's Malayness unreadable.

Figure 4.4: P7:1SMA performing Zapin Tunda at the Muara Festival in Singapore, 2019.

Source: Katia Chaterji



Act Two

This performance of *zapin* in Singapore opens up a discussion of the tri-fold intersection between performing gender, Malay ethnicity, and Islamic religious identity, and particularly the role of gender in mapping Malay Islamic dynamics. Academic attention to gender is a constantly evolving field. In early scholarship, researchers were socialized and conditioned into the gendered hierarchy of the white heteronormative West, resulting in Western-friendly analytical categories forced upon other subjects and subjectivities (that of male-female, man-woman, public-private, professional-domestic). This male worldview influenced the subjects that received academic attention (mostly performances of male bodies in public spaces) and simultaneously validated Western assumptions about gender roles (minimizing or overlooking entirely the role of women in musical environments).

Female scholars conducting research and publishing works in the 1980s and 1990s were hugely influential in changing the field. Radicalized during the second and third waves of the feminist movement, female scholars devoted attention to non-male bodied persons and incorporated feminism into their research methodologies. Their interests were in understanding the relationships of power in gendered or gender-coded behaviors and activities. It is this shift in scholarship – to be informed by feminism and to focus on power in society – that produced an understanding of gender as “a socially constructed system regulating all human behavior.”³⁹³ Judith Butler’s introduction of *gender acts* further theorizes gender as constitutive of performative possibilities and the stylized repetition of acts that are structured within the controls of socially sanctioned behaviors and taboos. Gender is the process by which the body bears meaning; it is not something that bodies “naturally” possess, but rather something that bodies *do*.³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Koskoff, “From Women to Gender,” 27.

³⁹⁴ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” 271.

Gender ideologies are seemingly rigid systems coding the repetitive rehearsal of acts that have been legitimized within a socially constructed binary, the boundaries of which test the limits of how individual actions are judged as “normative” or “deviant.”³⁹⁵ Musical behavior is one arena governed by socialized ideals of gender and sexuality that at the same time reinforces, defines, and validates one’s gender.³⁹⁶ In accepting gender as a socialized construction and performative set of acts, we gain a level of precision in defining the relationship between other identity markers, such as religion, and the performance of music and dance. When the assumptions of idealized gender are understood as social processes of their own, other assumptions, particularly those that link gendered and religious identities, are broken down.

P7:1SMA’s *Zapin Tunda* received negative feedback on the basis of their gender performance – specifically, their non-normative performance of Malay femininity. Their gender deviancy marked P7:1SMA as inappropriate stewards of Malay Islamic historical memory, especially when they performed an historical *dakwah* tradition like *zapin*. This is an example of the frequent conflation between what Shahab Ahmed calls the pre-text, text, and context of traditions claiming to be “Islamic.” *Zapin*, as the “text” representing Riau’s Islamization, does not symbolize Islam in its totality. Instead, *zapin* is a reflection of the pretext (the experience) and the context (the involved community) that produces and configures *zapin* for Malay Muslims. Expectations of practitioners’ performance styles based on gender are therefore not universal Islamic issues (as P7:1SMA’s critics would have us believe), but a Malay one.

Any commentary about women’s bodies and expected femininity exposes societal anxieties of the masculine. Modifications to performing arts traditions to include women (art forms that

³⁹⁵ Butler, 277–79.

³⁹⁶ Koskoff, “From Women to Gender,” 40.

previously excluded women) is a meaningful place to interrogate constructions of masculinity and how female participation is coordinated to protect masculinity. A compelling example of this process is *randai*, a traditional folk theater from the Minangkabau culture of West Sumatra that combines *galombang* movements based on *silat* (*galombang* being the name of the loose pants used as percussion in *randai*), Minang *kaba* storytelling, Minang music, and dancing. Historically, due to its connections with *silat* spaces, only men participated in *randai*, taking on both male and female roles in the *kaba* story. In 1984, *randai* entered the compulsory curriculum for male and female dance students at ASKI Padangpanjang (now ISI Padangpanjang), taught by scholar-practitioner Zulkifli, without a distinction between male and female performers and the parts they played in *randai*. It was at this point that Zulkifli, himself a *randai* expert and now respected elder, began to reconsider traditional Minangkabau roles for women in relation to *randai* performance.

In a proposal written by Zulkifli and Erlinda, the authors map acceptable Minang masculinity and femininity onto the movements available to performers in *randai*. They assert that it is unsuitable and inappropriate for women to perform *galombang* (a section of *randai* that involves *silat* movements), to take “big space, jumping, rolling, straddling,” to wear men’s clothing, and to produce the loud claps using their hands to slap the *galombang* pants like a drum.³⁹⁷ In an effort to make space for Minang women to perform *randai* in a way that is acceptable within Minangkabau Islam, Zulkifli and Erlinda argue for a renewal of *randai* to suit women’s traditional costume and smaller, more contained movements. In place of the energetic *galombang* clapping sections, Zulkifli proposes that women use a *tungkahan* instead to make noise, which is a wooden block traditionally used by women in the kitchen to sit while chopping

³⁹⁷ Zulkifli and Erlinda, “Women’s Randai of Sirabuang Ameh the Alternative Development for Minangkabau Folk Theater,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (2nd International Conference on Arts and Design Education)* 419 (2019): 139.

vegetables.³⁹⁸ The effect of this proposal is that certain movements and gestures are understood as unquestionably male (such as clothing, *silat* martial arts gestures, Islamic learning spaces, and the percussive *galombang*).³⁹⁹ The manner in which an appropriate women's *randai* is proposed suggests that what Judith (Jack) Halberstam calls "masculine nonperformativity" (the assumption that masculinity exists organically and is not/cannot be produced or performed in the same way that femininity is) is also at work for male and female practitioners of *randai*.⁴⁰⁰ That Zulkifli and Erlinda suggest modified women's clothing, props, and movements that subscribe to traditional notions of femininity on the basis of Islam reveals the extent to which women performing masculinity unsettles Minang Malay cultural expectations of normative behavior.

Like *randai*, *zapin* also underwent modifications in the Indonesian arts academies. The traditional narrative of *zapin* positions Islamization in Riau within a conservative gender binary. As an entertainment space historically facilitated by, through, and in community with other men, women were not incorporated into the telling of the region's Islamic past. Embodied Islamic aesthetics that form such an important part of *zapin* performance were mapped onto the Malay male body and associated with Malay Islamic masculinity. Women were, certainly, present in these entertainment spaces and often were the social actors that made such events possible, providing food, shelter, and childcare that supported others' entertainment and enjoyment.⁴⁰¹ When women began to enter professional arts schools during the New Order (1966-98), they made space for

³⁹⁸ *Randai* continues to be taught as a compulsory subject for the Dance and Traditional Music (Karawitan) departments at ISI Padangpanjang today, and despite Zulkifli's opinions stated in his article, many ISI instructors give license to female students to freely learn and perform *galombang*. In 2019, Zulkifli choreographed and directed a performance of his vision for "Randai Wanita." While this performance received much positive attention on campus, there have not been significant changes made to the school's *randai* curriculum based on students' gender.

³⁹⁹ Zulkifli and Erlinda, "Women's Randai of Sirabuang Ameh the Alternative Development for Minangkabau Folk Theater."

⁴⁰⁰ Judith Halberstam, "Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance," in *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 231–66.

⁴⁰¹ Interview with Riowan.

themselves in previously exclusive male spaces, creating female parts and transforming styles like *zapin* into a mixed-gender dance that would be socially acceptable within a Malay Muslim framework for women to perform and teach. As *zapin* becomes the increasingly female space that it is today, important questions arise around the performance of gendered and Islamic subjectivities by and for Malay participants.

P7:1SMA's *Zapin Tunda* questions the assumed congruency between constructions of gender/sexuality and individual expressions of Islamic and/or Malay identities. In considering the assumptions at work that influence the language used to describe women engaged in Malay Islamic performing arts, the seemingly fixed relationship between forces such as gender and Islam become much more complicated. This section dialogue introduces some of the important frameworks in place to address the problems of defining Islam and Islamic-ness, women's individual expressions of Islam, and the role that Malay performing arts plays in constituting Malay Islamic-ness. As ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff suggests, musical behavior is a compelling site to observe the ways in which individuals are constrained by socialized normativity and the ways in which they reinforce socialized identity markers. Going a step further, *Zapin Tunda* shows us how some practitioners challenge socialized gender norms and how the tone of criticism that they receive places moral judgment upon them as inadequate stewards of Malay Islamic history.

IV. CONCLUSION: PERFORMING PIETY

This chapter centers the stories of *zapin* that practitioners weave into their practice – what *zapin* is, how it came to be, and why it continues to be taught and performed – to reflect upon how Islam is cast in variable ways through the medium of dance. The many representations of Islam that come to bear meaning through participation in dance suggests a fluidity of available Islamic

narratives within the archipelago's Malay cultural history that serve different purposes. In amplifying the actions of young performers in the public sphere, the boundaries of what is permissible in Islam and the Islamic arts are made visible as sites of negotiation in cultural and gendered identities.

The performances of Sanggar Balairung Sri, Sanggar BI Production, and P7:1SMA illustrate three instances where *zapin* movement is employed to mediate local Islam and ethnicity. While far from exhaustive representations of the *zapin* form, these examples showcase the aesthetic choices available to dancers to facilitate nuanced performances of Islamic and ethnic belonging in different ways. The embodiment of *sopan santun*, as witnessed in traditional *zapin Siak*, functions as a teaching tool for secondary school students as they learn movements and gestures that align with assigned gender and that promote Malay values of humility and respect, coded within the visual language of Islam. Sanggar BI Production's *zapin* employs foreign symbols to assert a place for themselves within the *ummah* and to reclaim a modern Malayness. And finally, P7:1SMA's *zapin* explores the possibilities of expressing *sopan santun* while challenging heteronormative societal expectations placed upon dancers, their bodies, and the *zapin* dance form.

These performances show that some *zapin* experimentation is viewed as more acceptable than others among traditional Malay artists. The contradicting receptions of Sanggar BI Production and P7:1SMA, for example, make the boundaries of what is permissible in Islamic performance far more visible. While Sanggar BI Production's foreign/Arab aesthetic cues were accepted as a natural and expected response to an Islamic modernity and Riau's place within it, P7:1SMA's gender queerness masked the group's celebration of traditional Malay movement and they were accused of challenging local Malay Islamic authority. What is clear through these examples is the

important role of women in negotiating such questions of Islam (and what kind of Islam) in performance, either as the creative minds behind new choreographies or as the bodies of increasingly female *zapin* dancers performing on stage. Women are driving *zapin* in new directions, negotiating resistance and acceptance in the formation of their own Malay Islamic identities. Much like the historical ocean migrations connecting the Malay archipelago to the wider Indian Ocean Islamic world, women in *zapin* adapt their bodies to “flow like water” in the cross-cultural ocean of *zapin* possibilities as they position themselves on the local and international stage.⁴⁰²

At the risk of introducing a new *zapin* construction as a conclusion, it is worth considering the role that *zapin* holds in other forms of media production. In a short story published on the *Riau Sastra* blog, author Listi Mora Rangkuti utilized traditional *zapin Siak* as an allegory of spiritual purification.⁴⁰³ Titled “Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana” (roughly, “Zapin’s Glow in the Land of Palaces,” aka Riau), Rangkuti’s main character Sandra suffers a broken heart in Jakarta and visits her brother and sister-in-law in Siak, Riau to recover. Nothing seems to help Sandra mend her heart; despite her family’s gentleness towards her, Sandra becomes increasingly agitated. Unsure how else to help, Sandra’s family takes her to a *zapin* dance rehearsal nearby. She learns about *zapin*’s history, about the importance of honoring Islamic values in the performance, and about Malay tradition. Slowly, as Sandra dances and learns the meaning behind the dance, she understands that love is one’s belief in God. Through *zapin*, she mends her heart and purifies herself from a pre-marital relationship, re-orienting her life inward, *pada batin*. She takes the ethics

⁴⁰² This phrasing comes from my discussion with Sriwani about *zapin* characteristics. Interview with Iwan Irawan and Duni Sriwani.

⁴⁰³ Listi Mora Rangkuti, “Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana,” Blog, Riau Sastra, January 6, 2020, <https://www.riausastra.com/2020/01/cerpen-pendar-zapin-di-negeri-istana/>.

and aesthetics inscribed into traditional *zapin* and repurposes them as a model for her individual piety.

Zapin's origin story, purpose, and reimagination through new choreography necessarily make a claim to Malay Islamic histories and identities. The examples highlighted in this chapter seek to complicate a static understanding of Islamic history in the Malay world. Through performance, the nuances of embodying cultural knowledge and of reinvigorating/reinventing traditional arts walk along the same path. The long history of Islam in the Malay world creates a diversity of unique experiences and cultural memories, and performing artists are uniquely positioned to creatively stake claims to Islamic histories.

CONCLUSION

During my fieldwork, histories of Islam's arrival in Sumatra were explained to me as following one of two paths. Sufi mystics, most commonly from South Asia, brought new dimensions of spiritual understanding to Sumatra and imparted their knowledge to new adherents who would then establish Islamic schools of learning to train young Muslims in their hometowns. These traveling mystics created rivers of learning flowing from Aceh in the north down along Sumatra's western coast. *Salawat dulang*, the Minang mystical oral tradition explored in Chapter Three, charts this spiritual pathway vividly. Equally, Hadhrami Arab traders arrived in Aceh, the first port of call for Indian Ocean navigators before descending the Strait of Malacca. Arriving in the marketplaces of Sumatra, these traders introduced new Islamic ways of understanding the world that found strong footing with local customs and activities, convergences that supported Malay communities as they formulated Malay Islamic identity and tradition on their own terms. The music and dance form known as *zapin*, described in Chapter Four, traces its origins to these sites of trade and cultural negotiation.

As I continued to listen and observe in the field, it became increasingly evident that both pathways described above were paved by the arts, not merely ornamented by them. Music and dance served to facilitate many early encounters with Islam via *dakwah*, conveying beliefs and values of Islam in both theoretical and practical terms to those who looked on. Words sung, body positions adopted, sartorial choices made altogether empowered *dakwah* performing arts – and the bodies of its performers – as meaningful sites of Islamic knowledge. As such traditions passed down to new generations of practitioners, individual artists deepened their relationship to Islam by practicing. In *doing* performance (dancing, singing, drumming, creating), practitioners learned and came to understand Islam in ways different, but parallel, to textual studies of Islam.

This dissertation came into motion through consideration of performance not as an object of study but as a process and a way of knowing. Diana Taylor, whose scholarship and writing inspired the way I approach this research, asks, “How does expressive behavior (performance) transmit cultural memory and identity?”⁴⁰⁴ In the Malay Muslim context of *dakwah* arts in Sumatra, performance participates in the transfer of knowledge about history and religion. Expressive movements – words and gestures repeated by practitioners and their limbs – equally store messages about the arrival and localization of Islam and assert local agency in representing and legitimizing Malay Muslim cultures. This dissertation seeks to examine the relationships between embodied performance and the production of knowledge, and in doing so, brings performance into the disciplinary realm of historical research.

Across the chapters in this dissertation, I discuss representations of Malay Muslim identity in various artistic circles. Beginning with the questions that emerge from the racialized misrepresentations of Malay peoples that steep colonial writing about Sumatra (its landscapes and inhabitants alike), Chapter One engages primarily with the choices made by botanists and other travelers to Sumatra who participated in producing an image of Malayness that depreciated the long histories of Islam and the presence of Malay cultural arts in the region. It is worthwhile to dig deeper into these questions because of the impact that this image has on the livelihoods of Malay Muslim artists, then and now. Chapter Two takes up these issues by closely reading the language used in a *fatwa* issued by *Himpunan Seniman Budaja Islam*, a modernist Muslim cultural organization that was most active in Indonesia in the 1950s and ‘60s. Their *fatwa*, the product of a large conference held in late 1961, established a framework for Muslim artists in Indonesia to rely upon in defining themselves, and their creative practices, as both Indonesian *and* Islamic.

⁴⁰⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, xvi.

Chapters Three and Four engage with traditions that provide a means for inscribing local histories of Islam and the negotiation of Islamic identities in the act of performance and in the bodies of practitioners. The embodied nature of learning *salawat dulang* and *zapin* requires an internalization of spiritual growth and understanding. In claiming Islam as the foundation for both performance styles as *dakwah*, practitioners of *salawat dulang* and *zapin* creatively stretch the boundaries of what is possible as Malay Muslim artists. Innovation, flexibility, improvisation, and repetition are tools regularly employed to assert local and broader Islamic identity in different ways.

When I returned from my fieldwork in 2020 to begin writing these chapters, two global crises struck. The first, the covid-19 pandemic, clouded our days with fear and confusion. In WhatsApp communications with my interlocutors in West Sumatra and Riau, I came to understand the severity of covid restrictions on artists, whose livelihoods depend upon group gatherings, performance opportunities, in-person instruction, and face-to-face interaction. I was glad to hear that the built-in flexibility I observed in *salawat dulang* to improvise and adapt to new settings translated into our new reality, where TikTok and livestreams offered exciting new arenas for showcasing talent and engaging audiences far away. Singapore's Muara Festival, the Malay arts festival discussed in Chapter Four, converted to a fully remote format. Online video tutorials for "Let's Zapin Muara" (Muara Festival's theme song) led to an international dance challenge inviting music and dance groups across Southeast Asia to submit videos of themselves performing Muara's *zapin* to be included in the festival's grand opening digital showcase. In both instances, global connectivity takes on new meanings as performing artists embrace digital participation and viewership.

The second crisis that developed while I was writing these chapters was the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. With my own political awareness emerging as a young person through the events of 9/11 and the Islamophobia that followed, I was struck by similar anxieties of a single narrative of Islam dominating media airwaves. These events impress upon me the ongoing importance of working to redress misrepresentations of Muslim peoples and cultures through nuanced scholarship, and I hope that this dissertation contributes to these efforts, albeit in a small way. In discussing Malay Islamic cultural knowledge production and its relationship to the arts, this dissertation offers new ways of thinking about the performing arts as sites of historical knowledge and memory, the relationship between Islam and the arts, and the global diversity of Islam across regions and across traditions.

This dissertation opened with a description of a *tari massal* at the 2019 West Sumatra Qur'anic recitation competition. As I watched this impressive *tari piring/lilin* (Minang plate and candle dance, where in the former dancers balance ceramic plates on each hand and in the latter a candle atop the head), I remember searching for my friend who was performing that night. With over one hundred dancers on the field – and with my vantage point from the audience being quite far – I knew I was looking in vain. When my spouse (then visiting me) and I finally found him after the performance, he was reveling with his fellow dancers from the excitement of the night. He jokingly asked me if I still dropped the *piring* in practice (I had already dropped the plate twice), and then told me that he and his friends needed to pray before we could go home to Padangpanjang altogether. His face glistened from makeup, sweat, and the cool night air as he and his friends walked in costume towards the *musholla*. This rather ordinary moment stands out in my memories of the time I spent in Sumatra. It encapsulates for me how simply the performing and the pious selves move alongside each other, sharing roots and walking parallel routes.

GLOSSARY

- Adat** A Malay word derived from the Arabic *'ādah*, meaning local custom. It is sometimes translated as “normative custom” or “customary law.” The term refers to local customary traditions and practices in Southeast Asia that existed before the adoption of Islam and that run parallel to Islam's *shari'a*. Thus, *adat* forms the social law alongside *shari'a* and the civil code in many Southeast Asian areas. Customary law (*'ādah*) exists to some degree everywhere in the Islamic world.
- Akhlak** An Arabic word that means moral virtues in Islamic theology and philosophy. Also spelled *akhlaq*.
- Al-Azhar** Meaning “the luminous” or “the resplendent” in Arabic, al-Azhar is the name of the most famous university in the Islamic world, located in Cairo, Egypt. The great mosque in Jakarta, Masjid al-Azhar, is named after this university, a reflection of Hamka's affinity towards his time in Cairo.
- Al-Farabi** Al-Farabi was a medieval philosopher who lived in the late 9th/early 10th centuries and was the author of a respected treatise on music known as the *Kitab al-Musiqi al-Kabir* (Grand Book of Music). He wrote approximately 160 works on various themes, eight of which deal with musical topics, and of those only four have survived. For more on al-Farabi and the importance of his work, see Sawa's introduction to his translation in: Sawa, George. *Musical and Socio-Cultural Anecdotes from Kitāb al-Aghānī al-Kabīr: Annotated Translations and Commentaries*. Islamic History and Civilization; v. 159. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019.
- Alif** The first letter of the Arabic alphabet, which takes the shape of a straight line. At times synonymous with *satu* (“one” in Malay and Indonesian), *alif* serves as a reminder of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God). The first step of *zapin* is called *alif*, and it involves the dancer tracing the letter (a straight line) with their feet as they move through the step.
- Aqidah** Arabic word meaning Islamic creed.
- Ayat** *Ayat* (also spelled *ayah*) are the verses in the Qur'an that comprise each chapter, or *surah*. There are 114 *surah* in the Qur'an, all of varying lengths. The shortest *surah* is composed of three *ayat* only, while the longest is composed of 286 *ayat*. See *Surah*.
- Azan** The Muslim call to prayer, typically announced about 15 minutes before the prayer begins. It is recited by a *muezzin* multiple times a day from a minaret, rooftop, the door of the place of prayer, or from loudspeakers mounted atop the mosque minaret. Also spelled *adhān*.

- Baju Kurung** Traditional costume of Malay peoples in Southeast Asia (especially Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, parts of Indonesia, southern Philippines, and southern Thailand). Originally a term used for both male and female clothing, *baju kurung* for men was renamed *Baju Melayu* in Malaysia as it became recognized as the national costume. For women, *baju kurung* is a loose-fitting full-length outfit comprised of a long skirt (sarong) and a flowing long-sleeved blouse that reaches mid-thigh. It is often paired with a scarf and/or head covering. For men, *baju kurung/Baju Melayu* consists of a long-sleeved shirt with stiff collar and loose trousers. It is often paired with a scarf around the waist known as *kain sampung* or *kain sarung* and a cap called *songkok*.
- Batin** Arabic word meaning “inward” or “hidden,” and referring to the inner, esoteric dimension of Islamic mysticism. Its converse, *lahir* (*zahir* in Arabic), refers to the outer dimension of Islam. *Al-Bātin* (Hidden One) is included among the ninety-nine attributes, or names, of Allah.
- Beban** Malay and Indonesian word meaning “burden.”
- Bedug (beduk)** A drum used in Indonesia for the call to prayer, often employed when the human voice alone could not travel very far and before loudspeakers were introduced. In Java, these drums are also employed in *gamelan*. In Minangkabau lands in West Sumatra, this drum is called **tabuah**.
- Dakwah** From the Arabic word *da'ā* meaning to “call,” “invoke,” “summon,” or to “invite.” It refers to missionary work of bringing new believers to Islam (proselytization) or to reinforce and deepen individual belief. The latter meaning for *dakwah* is more commonly employed and embraces more nuance than instances of conversion alone. Muhammad is sometimes referred to as *dā'ī*, meaning “caller” to the religion.
- Dhikr** One of the most important practices of Sufis and of the Sufi community, *dhikr* means the remembrance of God. *Dhikr* is a spiritual method of concentration that typically involves an invocation of God's name or a sacred formula under the guidance of a spiritual master/teacher who belongs to an authentic chain of transmission (*silsilah*). *Dhikr* may also be performed by making repetitive movements, such as dancing around a fixed spot.
- Fatwa (pl. fatawa)** A published opinion or decision regarding religious doctrine or law; an edict. It must be made by a recognized authority, often called a *mufti*.
- Fiqh** Jurisprudence, specifically individual jurisprudence (a person's individual understanding of the meaning of God's law). There are four schools of *fiqh*, known as the four Sunni Schools of Law (*madhhab* in Arabic). The Shi'ites and Kharijites have their own, separate schools of *fiqh*.

Five Pillars	The five fundamental tenets or requirements of Islam: 1) the <i>shahadah</i> (also <i>syahadat</i>), declaration of the faith; 2) <i>solat</i> , the five daily prayers; 3) <i>zakah</i> , charity; 4) observance of the fasting month of Ramadan; and 5) <i>Hajj</i> , performance of the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime by those of physical and financial means.
Gambus	Malay <i>oud</i> , or lute, an important musical instrument of Malay Muslim peoples. It is similar to the <i>barbat</i> (Persian lute), but unlike the single-piece <i>barbat</i> , the <i>oud</i> 's (and the <i>gambus</i> ') sound-chest and neck are separate.
Gamelan	Traditional percussion orchestra of the Malay archipelago, consisting of metallophones, xylophones, gongs, gong-chimes, among other instruments. String and wood instruments, such as <i>rebab</i> and <i>suling</i> , also join <i>gamelan</i> ensembles depending on the region and style. According to legends of the <i>Wali Songo</i> , the nine saints who brought Islam to the island of Java, gamelan served as one of their means of performing <i>dakwah</i> .
Hadith	The literature that forms the basis for Islamic tradition. <i>Hadith</i> deal with the actions and utterances of the Prophet as recounted by His companions. There are two categories: <i>hadith qudsi</i> ("sacred"), in which God Himself is speaking through the Prophet, and <i>hadith sharif</i> ("noble"), the Prophet's own utterances. <i>Hadith</i> are further categorized according to the reliability of their <i>silsilah</i> (chain of transmission). <i>Mutawatir</i> is the highest category of authenticity, followed by <i>saheh</i> ("reliable"), <i>hasan</i> ("good"), <i>da'if</i> ("weak"), and <i>mawdu'a</i> ("fabricated").
Hijra	Arabic word for "migration" that refers to Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, marking the first year of the Muslim era.
Idul Fitri	One of the most important holidays in the Islamic calendar. It signals the end of Ramadan, the fasting month.
Jiwa	Indonesian word for "soul" or "spirit."
Kaba	A traditional Minangkabau storytelling genre. The word <i>kaba</i> itself is the Bahasa Minang word for <i>kabar</i> , meaning "news" in Bahasa Indonesia. <i>Kaba</i> are sometimes compared to the Malay <i>hikayat</i> genre, yet both forms are stylistically distinct and employ different literary devices. <i>Kaba</i> are primarily oral traditions, inherited from the ancestors, and passed down through song and performance, though more recently they have been written down.
Khutbah	Sermon delivered on Friday before congregational prayer. In <i>salawat dulang</i> , the opening section which serves as an invocation to God is called the <i>khutbah</i> .

Madhhab	Scholarly community surrounding a school of Islamic learning (ex. Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali).
Mohammadiyah	A modernist social and educational organization, presently the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. It was founded in 1912 by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Java.
Mudra	Codified hand gestures, shaped by the hand and fingers. Used symbolically in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist statues and in meditation, music, and dance.
Muqatta'āt	“Mysterious letters,” referring to the combinations of one to five Arabic letters at the beginning of 29 <i>surah</i> in the Qur'an (out of the total 114). Known as “openers,” these letters come just after the <i>Bismillah</i> phrase of each <i>surah</i> . Their precise meaning is unclear. <i>Alif Lam Mim</i> , as discussed in Chapter Four, is a <i>muqatta'āt</i> .
Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ)	Qur'anic recitation competitions, held in many Muslim countries and contexts. In Indonesia, there is a national level competition held every two years (the first national MTQ was held in Makassar, South Sulawesi in 1968). To determine the final competing reciters (<i>qari</i>), there are local, regional, and provincial competitions. There are occasional international MTQ in Mecca and Kuala Lumpur, with contestants arriving from various Muslim countries.
Musholla	Prayer room.
Nautch	Derived from the Sanskrit word for “dance” or “dancing.” While “nautch” alone might intend <i>adivasi</i> and <i>devadasi</i> spiritual dance, the term (“nautch dancers” or “nautch girls” specifically) reflects the culture of young female court dancers popularized during the East India Company era in South Asia, where female dancers performed for the attention of a male audience. “Nautch” performers were necessarily sexualized, and by the early 20th century “nautch” had become synonymous with prostitution and decadence.
Qari	“Reader”; more precisely, a reciter in public of the Qur'an.
Qur'an	The holy book of Islam. Among its many names are: <i>mushaf</i> , <i>al-furqan</i> , <i>al-Kitab</i> , <i>adh-dhikr</i> .
Ramadan	Month of fasting in the Islamic calendar.
Shari'a	Meaning “the way,” <i>shari'a</i> is God's divine command and a guide for Muslims towards salvation. It is subject to <i>fiqh</i> , or jurisprudence. According to <i>shari'a</i> , every act may be categorized as obligatory, not obligatory but

recommended, permitted, not forbidden but discouraged, and forbidden. Intention (*niyyah*) is critical in determining the nature of each act.

- Shirk** A name for paganism or atheism. Meaning “association” in Arabic, *shirk* means to associate something with God other than God Himself.
- Silsilah** Chain of transmission, the credibility of which determines the legitimization of the knowledge or stories passed down. *Silsilah* are important in understanding *hadith* as well as the authenticity of knowledge passed down in Sufi *tarekat*.
- Sufism** See *Tasawwuf*.
- Sunnah** Meaning “custom,” *sunnah* refers to the example led by the Prophet during his lifetime (his spoken and acted example). *Sunnah* establishes precedents that guide the customs of Muslims.
- Surah** A chapter in the Qur’an. In total, there are 114 *surah* in the Qur’an, each divided into verses called *ayat* or *ayah*. The *surah* are of unequal lengths and compiled in descending order, not chronologically. The name for each *surah* typically comes from some notable word mentioned in them (for example, *Al-Mursalāt*, the 77th *surah*, means “The Emissaries”) or they are named after a mysterious Arabic letter that appears at the start (such as *Surah Taha*, the 20th *surah*). See *Ayat*.
- Surau** Similar to the institution of *pesantren* in Java, the *surau* is a traditional Minangkabau Islamic assembly building used for worship and religious instruction. They are typically smaller buildings than mosques and are considered to predate Islam in West Sumatra. In Minangkabau matrilineal society, the men formerly lived and slept in the *surau*, apart from the home where the women lived (women maintained ownership over the home). It is commonly believed that *surau* were transformed into spaces of Islamic education upon the arrival of Sufi teachers to the area who utilized these spaces to gather students and teach.
- Syair** *Syair* is a form of traditional Malay poetry. Its name is derived from the Arabic word *shi'rr*, a general term that encompasses all genres of poetry. In its Malay context, *syair* are composed of quatrains (four-line stanzas) that narrate a longer story or lesson. Often compared with *pantun*, another Malay quatrain poetry form, *syair* is unique as a sung form that maintains a continuous idea within each stanza.
- Tarekat** A term for a school, order, or brotherhood in Sufism (Islamic mysticism, or *tasawwuf*). Its Arabic root *tarīk* means “road,” and is the word used to denote the major trade highways connecting the Islamic world. *Tarekat Syattariyah*, the *Syattariyah* Sufi order, is attributed with introducing Islam

to the Minangkabau regions of West Sumatra, and the oral tradition *salawat dulang* is connected to *Syattariyah*'s spiritual *silsilah*. Each order has its own *silsilah* which traces back to the order's founder and back to the Prophet.

Tarekat is also used to refer to one of the four stations of mystical learning, sometimes called the Four Doors of Sufism. *Shari'a* is the first level that leads to knowing oneself, representing the outward behavior of Islamic teachings, or the physical/exoteric path. It is followed by *tariqa/tarekat* representing the spiritual path, *haqiqa/hakikat* representing mystical truth, and finally by *marifat/makrifat* representing final mystical knowledge.

For further information, refer to *The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition*, edited by Gibb and Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

Tasawwuf	Mysticism within Islam. Etymologically, this word is connected to the Arabic term for someone who wears clothes made of wool (<i>sūf</i>), implying the rough garb associated with ascetics. This leads to the term <i>sufi</i> or <i>mutasawwif</i> , meaning "a mystic." <i>Tasawwuf</i> is the inner, esoteric dimension of Islam and provides a method of concentration in search of the Divine. See <i>Dhikr</i> .
	For further information, refer to <i>The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition</i> , edited by Gibb and Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1960).
Tauhid (tawhid)	The central doctrine of Islam, <i>tauhid</i> means the Absolute Oneness of God.
Tikar	Prayer mat.
Tukang	Artisan, practitioner.
Ulama	Arabic word meaning "science" or "scientist," but which specifically refers to the science of religion. It is a term applied to religious scholars and clerics who are respected as guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of Islamic knowledge, doctrine, and law. As local authorities, <i>ulama</i> were a focal group for resistance to European colonial rule (the Padri conflict in West Sumatra in the early 1800s being a famous example). In postcolonial and modern Southeast Asia, <i>ulama</i> interpret Islam in political terms, and there are ministerial departments dedicated to this work.
Ummah (umma)	Meaning "people," "community," or "nation," <i>umma</i> refers to the Muslim community worldwide and transcends ethnic or political definition.
Wahhabi	Term used to denote the doctrine and the followers of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wabbah (1703-92). Today, the term Wahhabi is associated with the reformist and purification movement in Saudi Arabia.

- Wali** An Arabic word meaning “friend of God” or “saint.” In Southeast Asia, the veneration of saints was a well-established practice. The nine legendary saints known as the *Wali Songo* are credited with bringing Islam to Java. In Snouck Hurgronje’s *The Achehnese* (1906), he describes a practice of saint veneration as a means of fulfilling vows for favors such as curing illness (for more on this phenomena in Aceh, see pages 292-303 in Vol. 2 of *The Achehnese*).
- Zamzam** The sacred well located just east of the Ka’ba in Mecca. Its water is distributed today through taps and is considered to have healing properties. It is believed that Muhammad Himself drank water from this well. Pilgrims to Mecca often bring small vials of *Zamzam* water back home.
- Ziarah Makam** Pilgrimage to a holy place, tomb, or shrine. The reasons for undertaking a *ziarah* may vary (making a request, praying, fulfilling a vow, seeking blessing or knowledge, etc.).

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