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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON ZAPIN-MAKING PRACTICES IN MUAR, JOHOR

HAFZAN ZANNIE HAMZA



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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON
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HAFZAN ZANNIE HAMZA

THESIS PRESENTED TO QUALIFY FOR A DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

2024



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الحمد لله بارئ فضل الكرم جيعا



ABSTRACT

Main Zapin, a Malay folk dance form with deep cultural roots, embodied a multifaceted tradition interwoven with rich cultural, social, and historical dimensions. This research employed a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the interconnected elements within Main Zapin: (a) adaptive competence, (b) value-oriented conduct, (c) constructive components, and (d) characteristics establishment, constituting the core of this dance tradition. The research objective was to delve into the concept of “Main” in zapin-making practices, as practiced by Zapin Melayu (Malay Zapin) performers in Johor, within its traditional choreographic context of production. This exploration sought to conceptualize and evaluate the “Theory of Permainan Tari,” revealing the intricate interplay between value-oriented conduct, adaptive competence, constructive elements, and characteristics establishment in Main Zapin performances. The research methodology encompassed a constructivist grounded theory approach, integrating ethnographic description and in-depth analysis of Main Zapin performances. Through interviews, observations, and literature reviews, the research uncovered intricate interplays between value-oriented conduct, adaptive competence, constructive elements, and the establishment of defining characteristics, showcasing the harmonious coexistence of tradition and innovation. The emergent “Theory of Permainan Tari” suggested that Main Zapin transcended mere dance; it embodied cultural heritage, creativity, and continuity. Additionally, the study conducted a comparative analysis with existing dance theories, shedding light on the novel insights offered by the “Theory of Permainan Tari.” In conclusion, the “Theory of Permainan Tari” extended its influence beyond academia, contributing to dance education, choreography, and cultural preservation. Main Zapin, reflecting shared values, creativity, and cultural continuity, offered invaluable insights into the dynamics of traditional dance, underlining its significance in the preservation and expression of culture. This research provided a comprehensive framework that enriched the field of dance studies, empowering practitioners to engage with dance profoundly. Acknowledging its limitations and methodological choices, the study contributed to the transparency and rigor of the “Theory of Permainan Tari.”

Keywords: grounded theory ethnography, Main Zapin, Malay zapin, play-performance



KAJIAN *GROUNDNED THEORY* TERHADAP AMALAN PEMBUATAN ZAPIN DI MUAR, JOHOR

ABSTRAK

Main Zapin adalah bentuk tari rakyat Melayu dengan akar budaya yang mendalam, merangkumi tradisi pelbagai rupa yang dijalani dengan dimensi budaya, sosial dan sejarah yang kaya. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan pendekatan *constructivist grounded theory* untuk meneroka saling kaitan antara unsur-unsur dalam Main Zapin iaitu: (a) penyesuaian kecekapan, (b) tingkah laku berorientasikan nilai, (c) elemen yang membina, dan (d) pembentukan ciri-ciri, yang membentuk teras tradisi tarian ini. Objektif kajian adalah untuk mendalami konsep “Main” dalam pengamalan Zapin, seperti yang diamalkan oleh pemain Zapin Melayu di Johor, dalam konteks tradisi produksi koreografinya. Penerokaan ini berusaha untuk mengkonsepsualisasi dan menilai “Teori *Permainan Tari*,” mendedahkan interaksi kompleks antara tingkah laku berorientasikan nilai, penyesuaian kecekapan, elemen membina, dan pembentukan ciri dalam persembahan Main Zapin. Metodologi penyelidikan merangkumi pendekatan *constructivist grounded theory*, menyepadukan deskripsi etnografi dengan analisis mendalam tentang persembahan Main Zapin. Melalui temu bual, pemerhatian, dan tinjauan literatur, penyelidikan menemui keharmonian interaksi kompleks antara tingkah laku berorientasikan nilai, penyesuaian kecekapan, elemen membina, dan pembentukan ciri yang menentukan, mempamerkan kewujudan bersama tradisi dan inovasi. “Teori *Permainan Tari*” yang muncul mencadangkan bahawa Main Zapin melangkaui tarian semata-mata; ia merangkumi warisan budaya, kreativiti, dan kesinambungan. Selain itu, kajian ini turut menjalankan analisis perbandingan dengan teori tari sedia ada, dan menjelaskan pandangan novel yang ditawarkan oleh “Teori *Permainan Tari*.” Kesimpulannya, “Teori *Permainan Tari*” meluaskan pengaruhnya melangkaui bidang akademik, menyumbang kepada pendidikan tari, koreografi, dan pemeliharaan budaya. ‘Main’ mencerminkan nilai kebersamaan, kreativiti dan kesinambungan budaya, menawarkan pandangan yang tidak ternilai tentang dinamik tarian tradisional, menggariskan kepentingannya dalam pemeliharaan dan ekspresi budaya. Penyelidikan ini menyediakan rangka komprehensif yang memperkayakan bidang pengajian tari, serta memperkasakan pengamal untuk melibatkan diri dengan tarian secara mendalam. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada ketelusan dan ketegasan “Teori *Permainan Tari*,” dengan pengakuan terhadap batas-batas dan pilihan metodologinya.

Kata kunci: *grounded theory ethnography, Main Zapin, play-performance, zapin Melayu*



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The classification of Malay dances that have developed in Malaysia over the years has been a subject of strict and different categorization based on their form. These classifications include *Tarian Tradisional Melayu* (Malay Traditional dance), *Tari Rakyat Melayu* (Malay Folk Dance), *Tari Pergaulan Melayu* (Malay Social Dance), *Tarian Rampaian Tradisional* (Traditional Dance Medley), and *Tarian Kreasi Baharu* (New Creation Dance).¹ These classifications emerged at different times and events and are used to suit the characteristics and aesthetic parameters of the forms presented, narrowing and distinguishing one from another. These classifications serve as a tool for audience members, dance educators, enthusiasts, and researchers to gain a deeper

¹ Other types of classification include *Tarian Klasik* (classical dance) or *Tarian Istana* (court dance) that refers to dances of court origins such as *Tarian Asyik* of the Kelantan palace and *Joget Gamelan* of Pahang and Terengganu palaces.



understanding of the different forms of Malay dance and the development of the art form in Malaysia. Each classification is unique, possessing its own aesthetic characteristics that differentiate it from others. They also reflect the cultural and social values of the people in Malaysia and how they have been influenced by various historical events and societal changes.

These classifications, however, favor the dances that are staged as a ‘performance’ and neglect the proper classification for indigenous practices. The concept of *tari* (dance) and *menari* (dancing) on the proscenium stage, are used (and misused) excessively to also explain the indigenous dancing phenomena beyond the performance stage. This approach, however, fails to take into account the rich cultural and social contexts in which indigenous dances are performed, and the significance of these practices in the daily lives of the communities that perform them. It also neglects the fact that indigenous dances are not solely limited to performance contexts but are also deeply ingrained in the cultural and spiritual practices of these communities.

Tari and *menari*, by definition, are equivalent to ‘dance’ and ‘dancing’ according to the Western standards. Although the terms have prevailed in several archaic Malay literatures such as in *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* (1371), *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (<1380), and *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* (c.a 1380) (see Nicolas, 2017), it is important to note that the terms ‘tari’ or ‘tarian’ are emergent concepts that have been popularly used since the early 20th century after the post-colonial period (Nor, 2000, 2011). The word ‘tari’ is a generic term used by Malay speakers in Malaysia and neighboring countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, and Singapore to refer to “dance” or, more specifically, rhythmic movements accompanied by music. Malaysians in general, may define the





term according to its formal definition; “body, hand and foot movement rhythmic to the beat of the music” (translation: author) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2017b). From an academic perspective, Nor defines the word ‘tari’ as a “formally arranged movements as in choreographed pieces” (2001, p. 46). The term arises from the need to “characterized various forms of arranged or choreographed movement motifs that may represent dance as showcase entities” (Nor, 2011, p. 41). Nevertheless, tari is now considered an exclusive art form and is often associated with prestige and status in the context of stage performances, other than its literal explanatory use as a generic references and universal identifications to all kinds of court, folk, popular or foreign origin of movements that are associated with music.

In local cultural practices, indigenous people in Malaysia may or may not use the word tari or tarian when referring to their culturally structured movement systems. In east Malaysia, namely in Sabah and Sarawak, Previous research has shown that these terms of reference are cultural specifics which are more “inclusive and embracing, and are performed as social events to be participated by all present” (Nor, 2001, p. 46) as opposed to tari and tarian that are formally arranged and more restrictive in nature. In summary, culturally specific terminologies refer to participatory dancing that is spontaneous and improvisatory, whereas tari and tarian refer to properly arranged and choreographed dancing that is meant for presentational fashion.

The use of word ‘tari’ implies foreign and linguistic supremacy over numerous other indigenous terminologies and concepts that are able to inclusively describes ‘dance’ within indigenous practice. Prior to the formulation, generalization and



popularization of the word *tari*, indigenous terminologies² such as *tandak*³, *igal*⁴, *sayau*⁵, *ajat*⁶, *gencok*⁷, *joget*⁸, and *main* were the traditional vernaculars used to describe the inclusive, participatory play and performance practices among communities of varying dialects and regions within the country. These indigenous terminologies reflect the cultural and social values of the communities that use them and are essential in understanding the different forms of indigenous dances and the development of the art in Malaysia. It is crucial to acknowledge and preserve these terminologies as they provide a unique insight into the cultural heritage, transmission of knowledge, and social significance of these practices.

This research is an ethnochoreological investigation on a concept known as ‘main,’ which is deeply rooted in the dance-making process within the folk dance cultural practices of the Malays in Malaysia. It aims to propose new insights into the

² Various terminologies are used to refer to ‘dance’ in the east part of Malaysia such as *igal*, *pangalay*, *ajat*, *kanjet*, *sazau*, and *sayau* while in the peninsular (and some parts in Sabah and Sarawak), the Malays used *main*, *joget*, *ronggeng*, *tandak*, and *gencok*.

³ *Tandak* (verb: *Menandak*) is considered the oldest form of Malay social dance, and is hypothetically the genesis of *joget* (see Nor, 2001, p. 46). It is popular in Sarawak, the largest state in Malaysia located on the island of Borneo, both as a traditional communal practice and as a stage performance.

⁴ *Igal* (gerund: *Magigal*) is a traditional dance practice that is performed by members of the Bajau community, and is characterized by its utilization of curvilinear hand gestures as well as the *Kulintangan* and *Gong* ensembles, known as *Tagunggu*. The Bajau use the terms ‘*pangalay*’ and ‘*magigal*’ interchangeably, although the former specifically refers to the dance of the *Suluk* community in Malaysia and the Philippines. *Igal* or *magigal* is particularly prevalent among the Bajau population in Sabah—a neighboring state to Sarawak, and is performed in a variety of contexts, including social gatherings, ritual ceremonies, and other similar events. Examples of these contexts include *Pagkawin*, *Magtimbang*, *Magpaigal-jin*, *Magpaii-bahau*, and *Magkalamat*, among others (see Hamza, 2016).

⁵ *Sayau* (gerund: *Sumayau*) is a generic term used by the Dusun community in Sabah to identify their dances. Similarly, the word *sazau* (gerund: *Sumazau*) is used by the neighboring and related Kadazan community. *Sayau* is typically performed with a set of hanging gongs as musical accompaniments and exhibits variations in choreography, music, and costumes among different Dusunic dialects all over Sabah.

⁶ *Ajat* (gerund: *Ngajat*) is a traditional dance performed by the Iban community in Sarawak, Brunei, and Kalimantan, Indonesia. It is accompanied by *gongs*, *canang*, and *ketebong* instruments, often performed in Gawai celebrations and social gatherings.

⁷ *Gencok* is an archaic term for dance in the Malay language, and is believed to have originated from the northern dialect in peninsular Malaysia. It is rarely used today to refer to any form of dancing.

⁸ *Joget* is an old term for dance in the Malay language and a popular social dance genre still performed today. It is believed to have originated from a hybrid of the Malay *Tandak* and Portuguese *Branyo* dances. The term is also used to refer to other dance genres, such as *Joget Gamelan* (*Gamelan* dance).



meaning of the term, how it is used and manifested in a syncretic dance form known as zapin. This study utilizes the Grounded Theory Ethnography methodology, which examines the concept as a social phenomenon, emphasizing both its theoretical and empirical aspects. The study also examines ‘main’ from a basic play-performance to a complex, systematic technique that governs the structure of play-performance in the zapin dance tradition.

‘Main’ is a Malay word that translates to ‘play,’ and in the context of Malay dance culture, it is closely associated with the zapin dance form, specifically *Main Zapin*. In the context of zapin dance tradition, performers used the term Main Zapin to refer to the dance and music form, and to some extent, the entire zapin event. Main Zapin is recognized for its inclusivity, which embraces performer-audience interactions that are distinct from *tarian zapin* (zapin dance). Main Zapin popularity and practices remained at the village level, overshadowed by the term and performance practice of ‘Tarian Zapin’ that is widely accepted and used beyond village settings, especially on the stage performances. Tarian Zapin is a relatively new style of performing diluted Main Zapin in the performance context, ultimately utilizing aesthetic and artistic values for audience consumptions.



**Figure 1.1**

Main Zapin demonstrated by traditional zapin performers



Source: Researcher's archive, 2016



In Johor, this traces back to an array of zapin festivals organized by Yayasan Warisan Johor (YWJ)⁹ since 1996, where hundreds of zapin performers across the state and neighbouring regions would gather at the event to showcase their well-choreographed dance and well-composed music. This effort gave birth to other zapin events and performances organized by various organizations in Johor and beyond.

⁹ Yayasan Warisan Johor (Johor Heritage Foundation) is a state government agency based in Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia. It was established to promote and preserve the cultural heritage of Johor, including traditional dances, music, and other forms of art and cultural practices. The foundation conducts research, documentation, and preservation of the cultural heritage of Johor and organizes cultural events and activities to raise awareness and educate the public about the state's rich cultural heritage. Refer to the website <http://www.ywj.gov.my/> for more information about the organization.



Figure 1.2*Tarian Zapin performances by Yayasan Warisan Johor*Source: <http://www.ywj.gov.my/tarian-zapin/>

The developments of Main Zapin as Tarian Zapin that revolves around Johor was recent. Earlier research suggests that it has already developed when it was brought to the *bangsawan* stages and urban entertainment parks in the early 20th century, along with *ronggeng* repertoires that includes *asli*, *inang* and *joget*. Post Second World-War period plays crucial part where zapin dances were introduced in the movie industry and as TV entertainment series (Nor, 1993). One classic example of *tarian zapin* beyond Johor is the one choreographed by the late Said Manaf¹⁰ in the 1972 for Kumpulan Budaya Negara (KBN), who might have inspired from the zapin he learnt from his involvement in *bangsawan* theatre and Malay movie productions. Although it can be regarded as a neo-traditional dance piece, the repertoire, *Zapin Malaysia*¹¹ is widely

¹⁰ The late Said Manaf is a well-known Malay dance master-teacher who was once served as a dance teacher and choreographer at Kompleks Budaya Negara in the early 1970s. He has also choreographed several other Malay dances; and some are being taught in public universities as part of their curriculum. Prior to being a choreographer at KBN, he was an active *Bangsawan* dancer-musician in Singapore.

¹¹ *Zapin Malaysia*, once a celebrated Zapin repertoire across the nation, holds the distinction of being the first of its kind to be taught through a diverse range of formal and informal dance classes. This choreography, the brainchild of the late Said Manaf, rose to prominence at the National Cultural Complex in the early 1970s. It was later disseminated nationwide through dance instructors as part of the Malay dance module in the Jurulatih Seni Budaya Negara (JSBN, translates: National Culture and Arts

considered as a traditional ones, to which it is performed, imparted and recently included as a compulsory repertoire in the Malaysia Arts School dance curriculum. At the higher education level, *tarian zapin* is also taught together with *asli*, *inang* and *joget* which are now clustered as either Tarian Tradisional Melayu (Malay traditional dance) or Tari Rakyat Melayu (Malay folk dance).

1.2 Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this research pertains to the recognition and understanding of indigenous dance practices, particularly within the context of Malay dances in Malaysia. There exists a gap in acknowledging these traditional practices alongside performance-based dances. The research aims to delve into this gap, specifically focusing on the intricate classification of Malay dances, with a primary emphasis on Main Zapin. Through this study, an effort is made to shed light on the cultural significance of Main Zapin, highlighting its unique attributes and role within the broader landscape of Malay folk dance.

Malay folk dance genres such as *zapin*, *asli*, *inang* and *joget* are “pan-Malay folk dances that are performed nationwide either as social dances or as choreographed

Instructors) program under the Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara (JKKN, translates: Department for Culture and Arts Malaysia). The dance is characterized by a wealth of motifs, each known by unique names such as *asas*, *unta*, *melingkar*, *acah*, *silang*, *tepuk*, *gesek-gesek tendang-tendang*, and many more. These motifs were reportedly recollected and compiled from Said Manaf’s memories during his active tenure as a performer in *bangsawan*. Some of his students, now esteemed dance teachers, assert that this repertoire has grown to encompass as many as 33 dance motifs, a testament to its evolution over time at KBN. Zapin Malaysia shares elements of *taksim* and *wainab* with Zapin Melayu in Johor, but it uniquely omits the *kopak* element. Despite its rich history, Zapin Malaysia is seldom performed on stage today as new zapin repertoires originating from different states in Malaysia have taken center stage.

pieces” (Nor, 2001, p. 35). Earlier research suggests that *Main Zapin* and *tarian zapin* are two completely different performative styles. *Main* is inclusive and embracing while *tarian* is exclusive and restrictive (Nor, 2001). Zapin is believed to have developed through syncretic process involving the migrated Hadhramis and Malay influence, while the other three genres are collections of dance forms of ‘eclectic origins’ (Nor, 2011, p. 48) and deconstructed from Ronggeng dance tradition. Since the 1930s, these four genres had been integrated, developed and evolved in Bangsawan stage, amusement parks, popularized by film industry, and later had become completely new entities quite recognizable from the older styles (Nor, 2000; Tan, 1993).

When the National Cultural Policy (NCP)¹² took place in 1971, local dance groups, enthusiasts, practitioners, and choreographers strived to create dance products tailored to fit the guidelines for “national culture.” Following the policy, Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Cultural Congress) established the Panggung Negara (National Theater), and later a government sanctioned troupe known as Kumpulan Budaya Negara (KBN) was formed in 1972. Since KBN’s establishment, it has taken the lead in spearheading the notions of NCP and of national culture through staging of indigenous dance repertoires all over Malaysia. New dance pieces have been created, folk dances and dance dramas have been choreographed and were staged nationwide.

¹² The Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (DKK, trans: National Cultural Policy) have metamorphoses into Dasar Kebudayaan Negara (DAKEN, trans: National Cultural Policy) that was endorsed by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) in 2021. DAKEN was trajectorized to be as an important entity in the Malaysian Family (*Keluarga Malaysia*) concept that emphasizes the values of inclusion, togetherness and gratitude. In the course of the development form DKK to DAKEN, Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN, trans: National Creative Industry Policy) was also formulated the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture.



Since then, various agencies and organizations were setup and play their part in propagating, reproducing, reconstructing, revitalizing as well as recreating Malay folk dances into new dance creations. Zapin, asli, inang and joget were later came to be clustered as *Tarian Tradisional Kebangsaan* (national traditional dance) accompanied by *Muzik Melayu Asli* (traditional Malay music) since the advent of Festival Tari Kebangsaan (National Dance Festival) in 1992.

In the past 30 years, zapin dance has become an increasingly important genre of the cultural development in Johor. Research on zapin dances have focused on its history, diasporic and proliferation, philosophy, and performance structure. In the literatures on this genre, zapin in Johor is recognized as having two different styles; (a) Zapin Arab, and (b) Zapin Melayu. Zapin Melayu, is a specific style performed by the Malays in Johor to represent themselves to others, and to differentiate Zapin Melayu from the robust and coarse Zapin Arab practiced by the Arabs descendants. The representation of this Malay styles of performing zapin occurs in controlled spaces in various events organized by the government agencies, i.e; Festival Zapin by Yayasan Warisan Johor. In these controlled spaces, zapin emerged as choreographed pieces or *tarian zapin* as opposed to its village origin and participatorial nature—*Main Zapin*.

Throughout the abovementioned developments, zapin dance tradition were negotiated through several reinventions, reproduction, and reconstruction processes onto stage performance which has gradually transformed from *main* into *tarian* that are presentational in nature and performed for passive viewers. The concept and practice of *main* seems declining, however, in these events, *Main Zapin* still prevailed as a ‘post-event’ and performed ‘at the periphery’ where performers play improvisatory zapin at



various spaces ranging from hotel lobby and courtyard, stadium exterior and parking spaces. At these spaces, *main* has developed from a straightforward and simple play-performance to a complicated systematic technique that regulates the ‘new’ framework of play-performance in the zapin dance tradition. The new performance spaces for *Main Zapin*, although completely apart from *tarian zapin*, has become a new site of negotiation where elements from *tarian zapin* have been included in *Main Zapin*.

To gain a more complete understanding of the concept of *main*, in-depth qualitative research is necessary. This research aims to better understand the fundamental choreographic realization of *Main Zapin* and explores the idea of *Main* within its new context of performance. The results of this study are then compared to *Tarian Zapin*, which is typically performed on a proscenium stage, and expands our understanding of culturally structured movement systems through the examination of *Main Zapin* as a dance making process.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research is primarily investigating the way zapin performers systematically arrange, combine and construct movements motifs as they perform *Main Zapin*. The aims of the study were to describe and conceptualize the processes involved in dance-music-making and when practitioners interact with co-creator and to develop an explanatory theory of these processes. Royce suggested that “by looking at the structure of the dances they create, we can see exactly how it is that they combine the standard elements of the particular dance form so as to create a dance that is new in its use of old



elements” (Royce, 1977, pp. 182–183). This will reveal the ways in which performers develop the ‘Main’ system as a framework of play-performance in the zapin dance tradition that is constructed from their knowledge of both Tarian Zapin and the traditional Main Zapin. Both practice and performance will be discussed through synchronic inventive actions (creations, variations and expressions) of dance performers and contextualized in relation to their understanding of social values, religion, and philosophy. The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Investigate the concept of Main as practiced and performed by Zapin Melayu practitioners in Johor by identifying its form, structure and style within their traditional context of choreographic production.
2. Analyze the concept of Main as a choreographic system in zapin dance traditions within the context of communal practice by Malay zapin performers.
3. Develop an explanatory theory of the processes involved in dance-music-making and practitioner interactions during Main Zapin performances, contextualized within the broader understanding of social values, religion, and philosophy.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do Zapin Melayu practitioners in Johor conceptualize and embody the term ‘Main’ in the traditional choreographic production, specifically identifying the distinctive forms, structures, and styles associated with it?



This question aligns with the first objective, aiming to explore the practitioners' understanding and embodiment of 'Main' in Zapin Melayu choreography, focusing on its unique forms, structures, and styles.

2. In the communal setting of Johor, how does the concept of 'Main' shape and guide the choreographic process and actual performance among Zapin Melayu practitioners, emphasizing its influence on the participatory aspects of the dance tradition?

This question directly addresses the second objective, aiming to investigate the impact of 'Main' on the choreographic process and performance within the communal setting, emphasizing its role in the participatory nature of Zapin Melayu.

3. To what extent is the concept of 'Main Zapin' a fundamental and integral element within zapin dance traditions in Johor, providing a systematic approach

and conceptual framework that contributes to the cultural richness of the region?

This question aligns with the third objective, focusing on the broader significance of 'Main Zapin' within zapin dance traditions in Johor, examining its role as a systematic approach and conceptual framework that enriches the cultural tapestry of the region.

1.5 Importance of Research

The field of Malay folk dance research is currently lacking despite the prevalence of performance practice and formal knowledge transmission in academic institutions. In light of the growing dance education and creative industry in Malaysia, the need for

secondary sources of in-depth research on Malay folk dance is particularly pressing and timely. Three recent doctoral dissertations have been published on the topic of Malay dance, one on Sumatran *dakwah* (Islamic proselytization) traditions of *salawat dulang* and *zapin* (Chaterji, 2023), on choreography in Malay films (Sagkif Shek, 2021) and another on the study of Malay dance in Singapore (Mohd Farid, 2021). To date, only one PhD research has been conducted on Malay folk dance, specifically on the history and development of the *zapin* genre from the 14th century to its national representation of Malays in the 1970s. Thus, this current research on the choreographic study of *zapin* is both timely and relevant in the fields of dance ethnology, education and the dance industry.

The Malay folk dance genre has undergone changes as a result of the advent of industrialization, which facilitated the widespread dissemination of the art form throughout Malaysia. This has led to the emergence of new performance practices among practitioners. Traditional styles of performance, rooted in *kampung* culture, have become increasingly rare. Despite this, *zapin* remains a significant contributor to the development of Malay performing arts in Malaysia. Its inclusion in cultural programs, as well as in secondary and higher education curricula, serves as evidence of its importance in the field of dance. However, a lack of emphasis on the play-performance element in the teaching of *zapin* repertoire has been identified through preliminary research. This study aims to address this gap by providing valuable knowledge and insights for dance teachers, enthusiasts, and practitioners to incorporate in their teaching, learning and performances.

As an ethnochoreological study, this research examined dance and movement analysis “beyond technicalities” (Bakka, 2005) and bring new perspectives on the choreographic know-how (physical technique) and know-what (interpretive) in defining ‘choreography’ from a Malay perspective. The practical applications of comprehending the choreographic knowledge garnered from analyzing the discernible patterns in Main Zapin could potentially serve as a valuable gateway for comprehending the intricacies of a vast array of dance styles beyond just the conventional framework of Malay movement aesthetics. This study aims to pave the way for future studies on the concept of ‘Malay Main’ in Malay performing arts by examining dance from a non-Western viewpoint and through an ethnographic experience of active participational dancing, in order to investigate perceptions of dance that may differ significantly from those found in Western-oriented dance studies.

1.6 Research Scope

This research is designed to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the multifaceted aspects of “Zapin-Making,” a term that encapsulates the full range of activities related to the creation, performance, and presentation of zapin dance and music within Malay culture. The primary focus is on the Main Zapin performance. This includes an examination of the intricate choreography, harmonious musical accompaniment, cultural elements, and the expressive artistic process-product that collectively form a profound and meaningful performance.

The study explores various aspects of “Zapin-Making,” covering the preparatory stages, play-performance activities, and the public showcasing of zapin dance and music. With a focus on the Main Zapin tradition, the investigation aims to uncover the cultural and societal significance embedded within these practices. The study primarily targets male performers involved in Main Zapin in its traditional context. This is a crucial area of study as zapin, akin to Zaffin performed by Arab descendants throughout Malaysia, has traditionally been a men’s tradition. Male performers have played a pivotal role in the development and evolution of zapin in Johor, particularly in the reinterpretation of the dance for public performances. This study observes that while women participate in the Main Zapin dance, the gender separation within this genre is distinct from Tarian Zapin in public performances. Specifically, in Main Zapin, the traditional practice is for women to perform the dance only with their closely related family members, preferably female. This unique aspect of the zapin tradition is worthy of further examination.

The fieldwork for this study is conducted in the state of Johor, where Zapin Melayu is a prevalent form of traditional dance. However, it should be noted that not all districts within the state possess their own distinct style of Zapin Melayu, despite its overall prevalence in the region. At the time of this study, there are at least 20 Zapin Melayu repertoires available in Johor, which are dispersed over six districts; Muar, Batu Pahat, Kluang, Pontian, Mersing, and Johor Bahru. Most of the master-performer-teachers in these locations, particularly in Mersing and Batu Pahat, have passed away, specifically Zapin Pulau in Mersing, Zapin Tenglu in Mersing, Zapin Padang Sari, Zapin Koris, and Zapin Dayung in Batu Pahat. Despite the loss of these master-performer-teachers, the successors of Zapin Melayu who once studied with them are

still active in these regions. Of all 20 Zapin Melayu repertoires (which includes variations in style) scattered in Johor, the researcher believes that for this data collection to be successful, certain prerequisites need to be devised to ensure the smoothness of data collection processes.

As such, this research endeavored to undertake a comprehensive examination of zapin practices from a specific location, taking into consideration various crucial factors such as the; (a) availability of dance masters and active practitioners, (b) active participation of male members in dance and music groups, (c) their involvement in Main Zapin and Tarian Zapin, and (d) similarity in zapin conventional movements. The study was conducted in Muar¹³, which was determined to be the ideal location for this research as Main Zapin is actively practiced in certain part of this district at the time of the study.

In Muar, the researcher observed six different zapin available in that locality, namely; (a) Zapin Lenga Batu 28, (b) Zapin Putar Lam, (c) Zapin Pat Lipat (d) Zapin Mahpom, (e) Zapin Ginjat/Dinjat, (f) Zapin Parit Sakai, and (g) Zapin Lenggang Parit Tengah. It is acknowledged that these repertoires may not represent all Zapin Melayu throughout the state of Johor. However, through preliminary analysis, it is determined that these repertoires meet the four requirements previously stated and are relatively refined, consisting of conventional motives considered to be typical of “Zapin Johor” per se, as seen in the overall *langkah* and minute movements such as skips and turns.

¹³ Muar is a historical town which borders Malacca to the north. It is also known as Bandar Maharani, and was declared as the ‘royal town of Johor’ by Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar (the 25th Sultan of Johor). The Muar River’s mouth or estuary is where the word ‘Muar’ is said to have originated.

1.7 Operational Definitions / Conceptual Terminologies

1.7.1 Zapin-Making

“Zapin-Making” is an all-encompassing term that comprises the entire spectrum of activities associated with the creation, performance, and presentation of zapin dance and music, an integral tradition in Malay culture. This term encapsulates the intricate choreography, harmonious musical accompaniment, rich cultural elements, and expressive artistic process-product that integrate to form a profound and meaningful performance—in the context of this research; Main Zapin performance. “Zapin-Making” spans the diverse dimensions of preparation, play-performance activities, and showcasing the zapin dance and music, a practice laden with cultural and societal significance within the Malay community.

1.7.2 Main, Main Zapin and Permainan Zapin

The thesis designates the term “Main” as a multifaceted notion, encompassing both the physical act of executing the zapin dance as well as the established system of choreography in Malay dance. In various instances and discussions, this thesis may refer to Main Zapin as an “event” that aligns with the understanding of those who practice the tradition. The term “Main Zapin” encompasses multiple meanings, representing not only the act of performing the zapin dance but also the dance performance itself. It is also used to refer to the overall dance event, akin to the term

“Permainan Zapin.” A more nuanced examination of the meaning and implications of this term can be located in the second and third chapter of the thesis.

1.7.3 Play-Performance

Richard Schechner’s concept of play-performance refers to a type of theatrical performance that blurs the boundaries between traditional theatre and play, incorporating elements of both play and ritual. Schechner argues that play-performance is characterized by a sense of improvisation and a blurring of the distinction between performer and audience, resulting in a more participatory and interactive theatrical experience (See Schechner, 2013). The researcher used Richard Schechner’s definition of play-performance as a starting point to understand the concept of play-performance in the context of non-theatrical dancing among the Malays. The researcher adapted Schechner’s ideas to analyze and understand the unique features and characteristics of non-theatrical dancing practices within the Malaysian cultural context.

1.7.4 Tari / Tarian

In this thesis, the terminology *tari* and *menari* are employed to designate the art form of “dance” and the physical manifestation of “dancing” within the purview of stage performance on a proscenium. It is important to note that these terms are not utilized to characterize the customary practice of “Main Zapin,” even though they may be interpreted as such. The utilization of these terms is specifically targeted towards

referring to the representation of the zapin dance form in a theatrical context, away from its conventional rural milieu, and within the confines of a stage setting.

1.8 Outline of Chapters

The thesis is written in seven chapters. Chapter 1, “Introduction” introduces the research with an exploration of the background, emphasizing the intricate classification of Malay dances in Malaysia. A detailed problem statement highlights the gap in recognizing indigenous practices alongside performance-based dances. Research objectives and questions are outlined, emphasizing the importance of the study in providing a deeper understanding of Main Zapin’s cultural significance. The research scope is defined, and operational definitions for key terminologies such as “Zapin-Making,” “Main,” “Main Zapin,” and “Permainan Zapin” are established. The chapter concludes with an outline of subsequent chapters, setting the stage for a comprehensive exploration.

Chapter 2, “Foundational Literature Review” delves into foundational literature related to Malay dances, exploring perspectives on choreography theory and practice. The evolution of Malay dances, with a specific focus on zapin, is critically examined. The chapter provides insights into the historical context and influences shaping Malay dance forms. Through an exploration of existing literature, it establishes a solid foundation for understanding the cultural and historical dimensions surrounding Main Zapin.



Chapter 3, “Research Methodology” introduces the Grounded Theory Ethnography methodology chosen for the study, highlighting its suitability for exploring Main Zapin as a social phenomenon. The research locale, Muar, is justified, and the operational definitions of key terms are clarified. The chapter details data collection methods, including library research, fieldwork observation, participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-visual recordings. A comprehensive overview of data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, limitations, and a summary of the chapter concludes the methodology section.

Chapter 4, “Ethnographic Accounts on Main Zapin,” provides a comprehensive ethnographic account of Main Zapin. It aims to explore various elements and characteristics of Main Zapin, focusing on the selected research locale and the dance’s broader cultural and contextual underpinnings. The chapter introduces the research locale, the southern region of the Malay Peninsula, with a specific emphasis on Johor, known for its vibrant zapin community and deep-rooted association with zapin, making it an ideal site for ethnographic exploration. The chapter then presents an in-depth look at Zapin Melayu (Malay Zapin), tracing its origins and evolution, highlighting the distinct variations between Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab (Arab Zapin), and examining the dance’s historical development and its role in the local community’s identity. The construction of Main Zapin is further explored through various techniques and movements, categorized into Main Langkah, Main Lagu, and Main Isyarat, showcasing the dance’s complexity and artistry. The role of musical accompaniment, particularly the marwas instrument, is emphasized, illustrating how music enhances the auditory and kinaesthetic experience of Main Zapin. This detailed examination sets the stage for a deeper analysis in the Chapter 5.





Chapter 5 of this thesis provides a comprehensive exploration of the essential elements, techniques, and characteristics that define Main Zapin. The chapter focuses on the interplay between dance, music, costumes, space, and time, aiming to offer a thorough understanding of Main Zapin's structure and cultural significance. It explores the symbiotic relationship between dance and music in Main Zapin, particularly in the region of Muar, Johor, where zapin encompasses both the dance and its musical accompaniment. The chapter underscores the centrality of movement and dance, and discusses the structural conventions guiding the performance of zapin dance and music, drawing on Nor's (1998) research. It reveals variations in the Main Zapin environment, where the performance structure is often adapted to specific circumstances and creative preferences of the performers. Furthermore, the chapter addresses the terminology and choreography associated with zapin dance movements, examining the concept of *langkah* in the context of its dual meaning within Main Zapin. The chapter concludes by exploring the variations in dance steps across different zapin repertoires, highlighting the diversity of this dance tradition.

Chapter Six introduces the core findings derived from the ethnographic exploration, presenting the emergent theory that encapsulates the essence of Main Zapin. It begins by highlighting the central category of "Main" and explores its significance and role within the broader framework of Main Zapin. The emergent theory is then broken down into distinct concepts, including value-oriented conduct, adaptive competence, constructive elements, and characteristics establishment, unraveling their interconnectedness. The chapter proceeds to analyze the interrelationship among these key concepts, exploring the dynamic connections between value-oriented conduct, adaptive competence, constructive elements, and



characteristics establishment. A section is dedicated to conceptualizing and evaluating the emergent theory, providing a critical lens to assess its robustness and relevance. The chapter concludes with a summary, encapsulating the key research findings and the emergent theory that elucidates the essence of Main Zapin.

The final chapter initiates a comprehensive discussion, summary, and conclusion, offering a reflective overview of the entire thesis. It delves into the insights derived from the emergent theory, highlighting its significance in understanding Main Zapin within the broader cultural context. A critical discussion follows, integrating the emergent theory with existing literature, providing a cohesive understanding of Main Zapin in relation to broader dance studies. The chapter includes an in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework, along with a comparative analysis that situates the emergent theory within the realm of dance studies. Practical implications of the research findings are discussed, shedding light on how the emergent theory can inform and contribute to the field of dance research and practice. Theoretical contributions made by the study and potential avenues for future research are explored, offering insights into the evolving landscape of Main Zapin. A reflective analysis of limitations and methodological considerations provides transparency regarding the research process. The thesis concludes with a comprehensive summary of key findings, theoretical contributions, and implications, wrapping up the exploration into Main Zapin within the cultural tapestry of Malay dance.