

Malay Dance

in Asia

*A Singaporean
Perspective*

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A dance which can contribute to change, creativity and growth of Asian dances is a dance which is willing to undergo necessary changes to flourish.

Malay dance in Singapore, was slow to blossom compared with those of Chinese and Indian dances. It began in the early 50s when the Malay educational bodies organized fund-raising cultural shows. At that time, girls in the Malay community were not encouraged to perform. They were estranged to any cultural concern over dances.

From the 1950s to 1960s Malay dance activist made efforts to gain recognition from their communities. Only in early the 60s, after the Singapore government launched their campaign to prove that Singapore would not be a cultural desert by introducing *aneka ragam rakyat*, did the attitude of Malays in general change toward dance activities.

The growth of Malay dance in Singapore is quite different from that of dances in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. In Singapore the Malay dance takes part in entertainment and not as part of ceremony. Dance was sustained by associations specially organized for the purpose. Malay dance is preserved by the performer's realization of their responsibility to community.

Even though the Malay dance did not traditionally grow from amongst the masses, the Malay community have provided able guidelines to enable it to develop with time. Malay intellectuals understood and realized that the Malay dance and culture are not static and should not only have personality but also able to flourish. They underscored this in a resolution adopted at the first Malay Cultural Congress which was held in Malacca. "The Malay culture can accept foreign elements as long as they are suitable and are not contrary to it." This guideline gave encouragement to Malay choreographers for experimentation.

The dances performed in Singapore during the 50s and 60s were similar

to those in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, as they came from the same roots. As a community of an independent country, the Malay choreographers felt that Singapore should have newly choreographed Malay cultural dances of their own. With this in mind, the local choreographers, with limited experience and knowledge, dared themselves to experiment.

Between the 60s and 70s, and especially for the Southeast Asian Cultural Festival in 1963, Sriwana was commissioned to produce Malay dances. Mr. K. C. Lee, then the chairman of the festival, gave his advice that dance must be staged by local choreographers. For that purpose Sriwana was able to choreograph its own dances, the "Tari Payung" (umbrella dance), "Tari Petani" (farmer dance) and "Tari Nelayan" (fisherman dance).

Later we choreographed a modernized Malay dance "Lenggang Kang-kong" using jazz rhythms and "Tari Gembira" using modern musical arrangements. Attempts were also made to include dance elements of other races into Malay dances such as "Tari Selendang" which incorporated Thai dance elements, "Lenggang Remaja" from Javanese dance elements and "Tari Taman Gamely Sari" from Indian dance elements.

Dances which adopted changes and incorporated other dance elements received good response when they were performed for Malay audiences. Such an attitude was regarded as the community's approval to the changes

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made and this is important because cultural dances have strong links with the original culture of the people.

Aside from incorporating non-Malay elements, the Malay choreographers also succeeded in their experiments in non-Malay dance styles with Malay flavor. This was evident in their successful innovation of "*Tari Petani*" created by Francis Yeo, a ballet dancer. "*Tari Petani*" which originally consisted of the ballet style and movements had been adapted in such a way that its movements could be accepted as Malay. They have also adapted the western dance style to create their contemporary dances. This liberal attitude allowed Malay dance to keep up with the times and contribute in its own way to the growth of Asian dances.

The ability of local arts lovers to ensure the growth of the Malay dance through associations, dance workshops and producing stage

performances become a strong factor in enhancing their continued creativity. What is most important is that local dance activists carry out these activities out of their deep love for the Malay dance. This love has made Malay dance activists in Singapore willing to work without material returns. Although they are amateurs, their commitment and dedication are as deep as those of the professionals in the sense that they feel that they have a full responsibility for the creativity and continuity of the Malay dance.

The activities are very important for the growth and continued creativity of Malay dance. With numerous activities, the Malay dance activists have the opportunity to produce their creations year after year. This can be seen in their stage presentations organized by government ministries such as "*Tariana*," "*Rencah Budaya*" and "*Selangkah Seirama*" by Sriwana, "*Gema Seni*" by Perkumpulan Seni, "*Kilir Jati*" by Persatuan Kemuning

Singapura and "*Gamely Tari*" by the Singapore Dance Groups. These activities have also led to the emergence of choreographers such as Som M. Said, Khaziah Yem, Hamzah Rahim, Fauziah Hanum Yusuf, Rawi Hamim, Norlie Ismail, Sumiah Samsuddin and Halimah Kasbi of Sriwana, Salleh Buang and his wife, Noorazilah, of the Persatuan Kemuning Singapura, the two brothers Kamal and Kamil Ridzuan of Perkumpulan Seni, Safarina of the Rina Dance Group, Naim Pani of the Naim Pani Dance Group, Osman Hamid and Rahman Said of the People's Association, who often contributed their creations for local performances. There are also other choreographers who are active in community clubs who used to contribute in the Singapore Dance Festival organized by the People's Association and National Theater Trust.

What concerns the Malay Community at present is not the lack of creations and creativity in

the Malay dance, but the nature of the creations. Generally, innovations in such a field are always influenced by global influences in the economy. But globalization in arts, especially in dance means national borders do not operate.

In cultural globalization, people tend to look to the west. This may be due to the fact that the west has sophisticated and influential information systems. Local cultural experts hope that innovations and integration do not cut off the Malay dance from its people. In fact, they hope that innovations will provide a channel to provincial dances.

To allow the continuity of creativity in Asian dance, activities should give opportunities to choreographers and dancers to expand their cultural elements. With such activities I believe the continuing creativity of Asian dance can be assured.