Minangkabau Dance in West Sumatra: Tradition,Training and Tourism

William Peterson

While the Minangkabau dance reflects traditions of the Minangkabau people of Sumatra, Indonesia, it is evolving in the context of increasing tourism. William Peterson provides insights into the development of the dance

Dance among the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra balances a number of forces; though its content continues to reflect traditional belief systems, it is increasingly informed by the regional, national, and international perspectives of young dancers and choreographers trained at dance academies. At the same time, Minangkabau dance is now being seen by a growing tourist audience, a factor which has altered the conditions of reception, as well as the structure of a dance performance. This report will focus on the current state of Minangkabau dance as it is taught, disseminated, and performed in the Minangkabau highlands of West Sumatra[1], while paying special attention to three areas: 1) the way in which traditional belief systems are reflected in Minangkabau dance and music; 2) the relationship between the regional dance academy in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra and Minangkabau dance as performed in the region; and 3) the nature of dance performances in the highland town of Bukittinggi.

'Tari Pasambahan', Sakato Group

Traditional Beliefs and Dance

The system of traditional beliefs, or *adat* as it is known in the Indonesian language, is deeply inscribed in Minangkabau dance. One of the key elements of Minangkabau *adat* is a matrilineal system which predates the arrival of Islam in the region[2]. To the Minangkabau, a*dat* serves as a central organising principle which regulates all social exchanges and provides a set of meanings for the phenomenon found in daily life[3]. Elements of a*dat* are still very much present in Minangkabau dance and music today, even at a time when these forms are reaching out to a wider audience of non-Minangkabau.

Minangkabau dance is largely a folk tradition, rooted in the rhythms of rural life and often tied to important events such as harvest festivals, or *adat* ceremonies. Stylistically, it has much in common with *pencak silat*, the martial art form found throughout the Pan-Malay world. The Minangkabau version of *silat* is characterised by a low stance, frequent kicks, evasive use of the arms and hands, and is generally considered more rhythmic than other versions of the form (Alexander). Like Minangkabau dance, the overall pattern of movement in *silat* is often indirect and circular, with the fighters stalking one another and balancing out one another's movements rather than attacking directly. The footwork can be quite vigorous while the arms and hands are kept well away from the torso. The link between dance and *silat* is acknowledged by presenters of dance in Bukittinggi; in an evening's program, dance and *silat* are presented side by side.

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Dance frequently serves as a tool through which *adat* is disseminated and reinforced. In one popular Minangkabau dance known as the *Tari Rantak*, martial arts movements are used to convey a particular aspect of *adat*, in this case "the readiness and bravery of Minangkabau youths in defending their homeland" (Saliguri). The choreography of the *Tari Rantak* features men and women engaging in vigorous foot-stamping, intense drum-beating, and rigid line formations which appear martial at times, all of which is appropriate given the dance's programmatic character. Among the Minangkabau, all agricultural property passes through the first born female in the family; thus it is consistent with the role of women in Minangkabau society that they execute all of the heroic, vigorous movements carried out by the men.

Yet another dance, the *Tari Alang Babega*, reflects a key feature of public life in Minangkabau: the relationship of the young to the head of their clan. This relatively new dance choreographed by Gusmiati Suid[4] depicts this key relationship by evoking the movements of a sparrowhawk in flight; the sparrowhawk, representing the clan leader or *penghulu*, offers protection and guidance by spreading his "wings" and encircling the remaining dancers who represent Minangkabau youth. The teachings embodied in these two dances in many ways mirror the respective positions of women and men in Minangkabau society; while women are valued for the continuity they provide the family and their connection with the land, the actual civic life of the community is largely male-dominated. Thus these two dances when taken together can be seen as a reflection of the way in which the Minangkabau have reached an accommodation between the original, matriarchal culture, and Islam, with its stress on spiritual and moral guidance largely at the hands of male elders.

The patterns found in the music which accompanies Minangkabau dance can also be interpreted as a reflection of *adat*, according to Minangkabau choreographer and dance teacher Indra Utama (19 May 1993). The ensemble of percussive instruments which accompanies Minangkabau dance is similar to, though smaller than the Javanese gamelan. The principal percussive instrument, the *talempong*[5], is similar in shape to the Javanese *bonang*[6], and is pitched to approximate Western tuning, with eight tones. These sets of *talempong* engage in

vigorous exchanges with one another during performance, evoking the rhythms of human dialogue; according to Utama, that dialogic music is an analogue of Minangkabau democratic principles (Utama 19 May).

Utama's assertion needs to be contextualised in terms of the Minangkabau concept of democracy; Minangkabau tour guides and Western anthropologists[7] point out that unlike Western democracy, Minangkabau democracy involves a lengthy, communal discussion of differences, giving equal time to minority opinions as the issue is debated so completely that an eventual consensus is reached. One could argue, as some Minangkabau tour guides do, that Western democracy ensures the tyranny of the majority over the minority, while the Minangkabau system ensures that minority voices are always heard. Someone defending the Western position might maintain that the Minangkabau form appears to involve talking an issue to death, to the point where only sheer exhaustion, and not the strength of ideas, eventually necessitates a final compromise. Whatever position one takes, it is precisely this sort of lively, rapid-fire, back and forth dialogic structure that Utama is referring to when he asserts that the musical lines of the *talempong* are concrete expressions of Minangkabau *adat* as it relates to notions of democracy and conflict resolution.

Minangkabau Dance Training

Traditional Minangkabau dance and music is taught in West Sumatra at the arts academy ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia) in Padang Panjang, a small provincial town in the foothills leading into the Minangkabau heartland. As the principal training ground for professional dancers and the institution where virtually all of the most important Minangkabau choreographers have either trained or taught, its guiding philosophy shapes the present and future of Minangkabau dance. ASKI is one of six arts academies in the country, and the only one in Sumatra. Thus, not surprisingly, Minangkabau dance features prominently in the curriculum there.

The academy also endeavours to expose students to a wide range of dance forms from the traditional to the modern, while also introducing them to forms from Indonesia's other regions. While visiting the academy in May of 1993, I listened to an ensemble rehearsing traditional music from the Riau Archipelago which sounded much like flamenco; saw students rehearsing the *Tari Payung*, a courtship umbrella dance which is essentially a Portuguese concept, but with Malay movements; sat in on a session in which students polished up their steps for a Western chorus-line routine; and witnessed a Muslim instructor, who was

Puti Limo Jurai

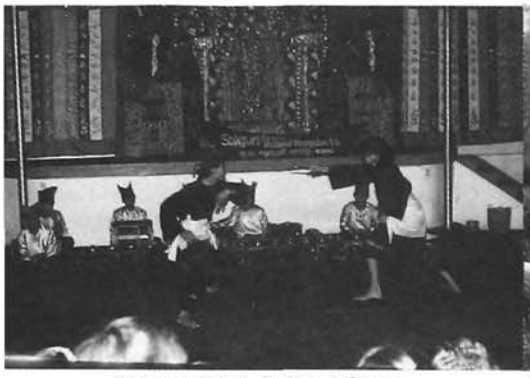
wearing the *tudung* (traditional headdress), leading a group in a traditional Achenese dance.

Throughout my stay there, teachers, administrators and students all stressed the importance of learning to create "a new dance with traditional roots", sometimes even using the same phrase to describe this aspect of the school's mission (Esten, Utama 17 May 1993). Toward that end, ASKI engages teachers of traditional Minangkabau dance from the outlying villages to spend two weeks in residence, teaching students dance steps. Recently, students have been encouraged to study directly in the villages of West Sumatra, in an attempt to provide a richer understanding of the tradition which they are assimilating.

In a recent article published in *The Drama Review*, Indonesian dance critic Sal Murgiyanto points out that some village residents have complained that during their brief one or two week residencies, student dancers are "disrupting their traditions" (152). While this may be true, dancers who were canvassed at ASKI feel that what they are learning and transmitting is part of a living tradition which must either be willing to adapt or risk the possibility of dying out. Whereas scholars, in their search for "authenticity", tend to scrutinise and validate performances played out at the village level, today's Minangkabau performers and audience members are encountering one another in venues where money is exchanged; by choosing to validate "authentic" village performances while condemning commercial expressions of traditional dance forms, scholars may unwittingly be contributing to the demise of traditional forms.

Dance in Bukittinggi

One of the few regular, income-earning opportunities in West Sumatra for ASKI-trained dancers is to perform with one of the four groups appearing at the local *Sanggar Seni* (cultural centre) in the highland town of Bukittinggi. While some dancers continue their training and eventually leave the region for studies at dance academies elsewhere in Indonesia, a significant number stay behind, providing a steady supply of dancers to perform in front of a growing, largely tourist audience. Recently designated a tourist development area by the central government, Bukittinggi has long been popular with European "travellers" as a relaxed and pleasantly cool stopover on the Trans-Sumatran Highway. Today, the evening performances of local dance at the *Sanggar Seni* are one



'Pencak Silat', Saliguri Group

Minangkabau Heartland

'Tari Piring', Sakato Group

of the town's major tourist attractions. The four groups performing there on a regular basis are Sakato, Saliguri, Puti Limo Jurai, and Saayun Salangkah. In addition to providing regular part-time employment for about three dozen local dancers and a similar number of musicians, the performances also indirectly generate supplemental income for the numerous young men who earn commissions on the sale of tickets, audio tapes, and musical instruments.

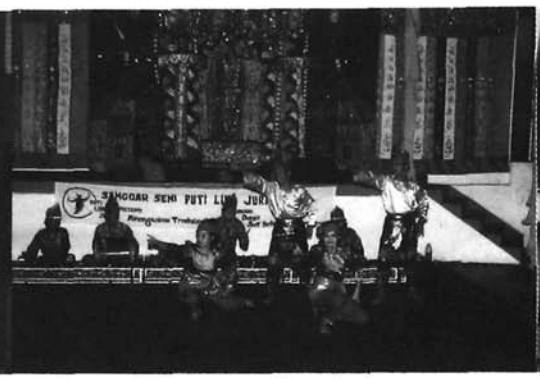
Each group presents their own program consisting of a welcoming dance or *Tari Pasambahan*, followed by a series of short dances interspersed with musical interludes. The evening usually concludes with the famous "plate dance" - *Tari Piring* - followed by the "handkerchief dance", or Tari *Saputangan*. In addition, each dance performance includes a demonstration of *pencak silat*. One group also includes a ten-minute condensed version of Minangkabau popular theatre, known as *randai*[8].

At the village level, each of these dances might be presented separately and in completely different contexts; for instance, the *Tari Pasambahan* might be performed outside one's home or in a public place before an honoured guest, while the *Tari Piring* would traditionally be performed at harvest time and would be open to all members of the community. *Pencak silat* might be performed in front of an audience of martial arts enthusiasts, other *silat* practitioners, or one's teachers, while the Tari *Saputangan* would provide an officially-sanctioned courtship opportunity for young, unmarried men and women. For the tourist market, all of these dances are brought together and performed in an indoor hall on a carpeted dance floor in front of a seated audience. Costumes are often more elaborate and colourful than they might be at the village level, while a mock wedding procession is sometimes added to provide a further opportunity for Minangkabau dancers to show off their finery.

Two popular dances, the *Tari Indang* and the *Tari Piring*, or "plate dance", are essentially reworkings of dances which developed in villages and towns. Of the dances which are found elsewhere in the Malay world, the *Tari Indang* is perhaps the best known. Essentially a line dance, the *Tari Indang* relies upon large, sweeping hand gestures reminiscent of *pencak silat*, many of which are executed from a seated position. The dance is related to a form of movement and recitation used to spread the message of Islam. In the version performed in Bukittinggi, choreographed by Gusmiati Suid, dancers sing and sway rhythmically in time with the music, alternating up and down, back and forth. Motions are

'Tari Indang', Sakato Group

Students at ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia)



'Tari Alang Babega', Puti Limo Jurai

ASKI

repetitive and circular, resembling the rising and falling of waves.

The movements of the dance imply a cooperative stance between individuals, underscoring the importance of working collectively to achieve economic prosperity on the local or even national level; in this sense, the dance demonstrates the concept of *gotong royong* or "working together cooperatively," a key tenet in the Indonesian government's national economic development campaign which began in the late 1950s. *Gotong royong* is deeply rooted among the Minangkabau; even today, families living in the same community assist one another in the planting and harvesting of rice or while undertaking any large-scale project. Such cooperative ventures are essential in a region where agricultural mechanisation is virtually non-existent.

A standard feature of every dance group in Bukittinggi is the *Tari Piring*, or "plate dance", associated with the harvesting of rice. Dancers enter the performance area holding a small plate in each hand, and wearing a ring carved from kemiri nut, on the tip of one finger of each hand. Tapping the plate rhythmically from the underside, the dancer delicately moves the plates back and forth, up and down, in increasingly rapid, large, circular motions, all the while moving in graceful unison with the other dancers. A joyful, exuberant feeling is maintained throughout as the dancers become more and more daring in their movements while simultaneously swinging the plates. Suddenly, one of the dancers leaps violently onto a pile of broken plates which have been spread across the dance floor, jumping up and down among the shards, while sustaining the rhythmic tapping and swinging motion. Women and men are equally vigorous in attacking the broken plates with their bare feet. The male dancers in some of the groups in Bukittinggi even roll about in the shards without a shirt.

Dance teacher Indra Utama points out that the tight choreography and vigorous movements which characterise the versions enacted by the groups in Bukittinggi stand in sharp contrast with the more anarchic quality of the village versions of the dance where anyone who feels moved by the spirit is welcome to participate (Utama 19 May). The potential for injury to the dancers is also raised; Utama notes that village dancers leap upon piles of glass fragments considerably sharper than the plate shards used by performers in Bukittinggi (Utama 19 May). For a dancer to escape injury under these conditions, a trance-like state would seem to be necessary. While trance-dances are common throughout all of Southeast Asia, some dances, especially in Peninsular Malaysia, have come under attack for being

Talempong Players, Puti Limo Jurai

contrary to the spirit and teachings of Islam; the elements of trance and mediumship are viewed as sacrilegious. Although the Minangkabaus are known for their devotion to Islam, they seem to have found a way to reconcile this dance with their faith.

The inter-related elements of tradition, training and tourism all shape the Minangkabau dance today. While dance continues to express *adat*, training programs are exposing a younger generation of dancers to traditions from outside the region. That training, combined with the growth of a tourist audience will ultimately alter more than just the frame of the performance event; eventually content will be influenced in fundamental ways as well. Such a change may well be consistent with the Minangkabau concept of *adat*; though the basic elements of *adat* such as loyalty to Allah and one's clan are considered unchallengeable, the Minangkabau allow for a consensus of community leaders and experts to alter the less fundamental aspects of tradition in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Just as *adat* is subject to change so long as its core features remain intact, traditional dance is open to new elements as well. This pragmatic relationship to tradition may be one of the only ways Minangkabau dance can survive in a world where smaller cultures seem to be constantly over-run by the larger ones. ■

NOTES

1 The state of Negri Sembilan in Peninsular Malaysia also contains a large Minangkabau population. The dance traditions of the four million Minangkabau living in West Sumatra, an area regarded as the heartland of Minangkabau culture, are the focus of this article.

2 This system has long been a source of fascination to anthropologists. See Frederick Errington, Manners and Meaning in West Sumatra. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984; Katherine Stenger Frey, Journey to the Land of the Earth Goddess, Jakarta: Gramedia Publishing, 1986; Kato, T., Matriliny and Migration: Evolving Minangkabau Traditions in Indonesia, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982.

3 The need to find a basis in *adat* for all phenomenon found in daily life seems common among the Minangkabau. Local tour guides in West Sumatra take great delight in pointing out that virtually everything one encounters in the region - from the colors used to drape a wedding canopy to the unique, eye-catching upward sweep of the traditional Minangkabau roof line - has a detailed meaning which somehow relates to *adat*. For instance, the roof line is said to pay homage to a young Minangkabau water buffalo that defeated a mature one in a contest with the invading Majapahit; the outcome of which permitted the Minangkabaus to govern themselves. The word "Minangkabau" is sometimes defined as "victorious water buffalo," suggesting that the people define themselves in terms of their shared relationship to this single, important event. Frederick Errington explores this aspect of *adat* in great detail, citing many such examples (Errington, Frederick, "Manners and Meaning in West Sumatra", New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

4 Suid and Huriah Adam are the two best-known Minangkabau choreographers, with Huriah being perhaps the more influential of the two. Indonesian dance critic Sal Murgiyanto credits Huriah with having "invented a 'Minangkabau' dance technique as the basis for professional training of Minangkabau dancers and choreographers" (142). The martial arts basis for much of Minangkabau dance is also attributed to Huriah's influence. For an extended account of the way in which Huriah's work fits into the broader context of Indonesian dance, see Sal Murgiyanto's article, "Moving between Unity and Diversity: Indonesian Dance in a Changing Perspective," *The Drama Review* 37, no. 2 (T138): 131-160.

5 The traditional *talempong* is hand-held and consists of only five tones, approximating the notes C,D,E,F, and A. Although the hand-held *talempong* is still used in villages, most dance troupes utilise at least three sets of *talempong* on racks, each in a different octave. In addition to the *talempong* and a number of other traditional drums and time markers, the complete dance orchestra includes two flute-like instruments made from bamboo. The deepest of the two, the *saluang*, expresses a melancholic, longing quality, while the *bansi* plays the higher registers.

6 A gong chime consisting of eight or more pots on a horizontal rack.

7 See Frederick Errington for a more detailed discussion of this concept.

8 For a detailed account of *randai* with labanotation scores, see Mohd Anis Md Nor's *Randai Dance*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Department of Publications, 1986.

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