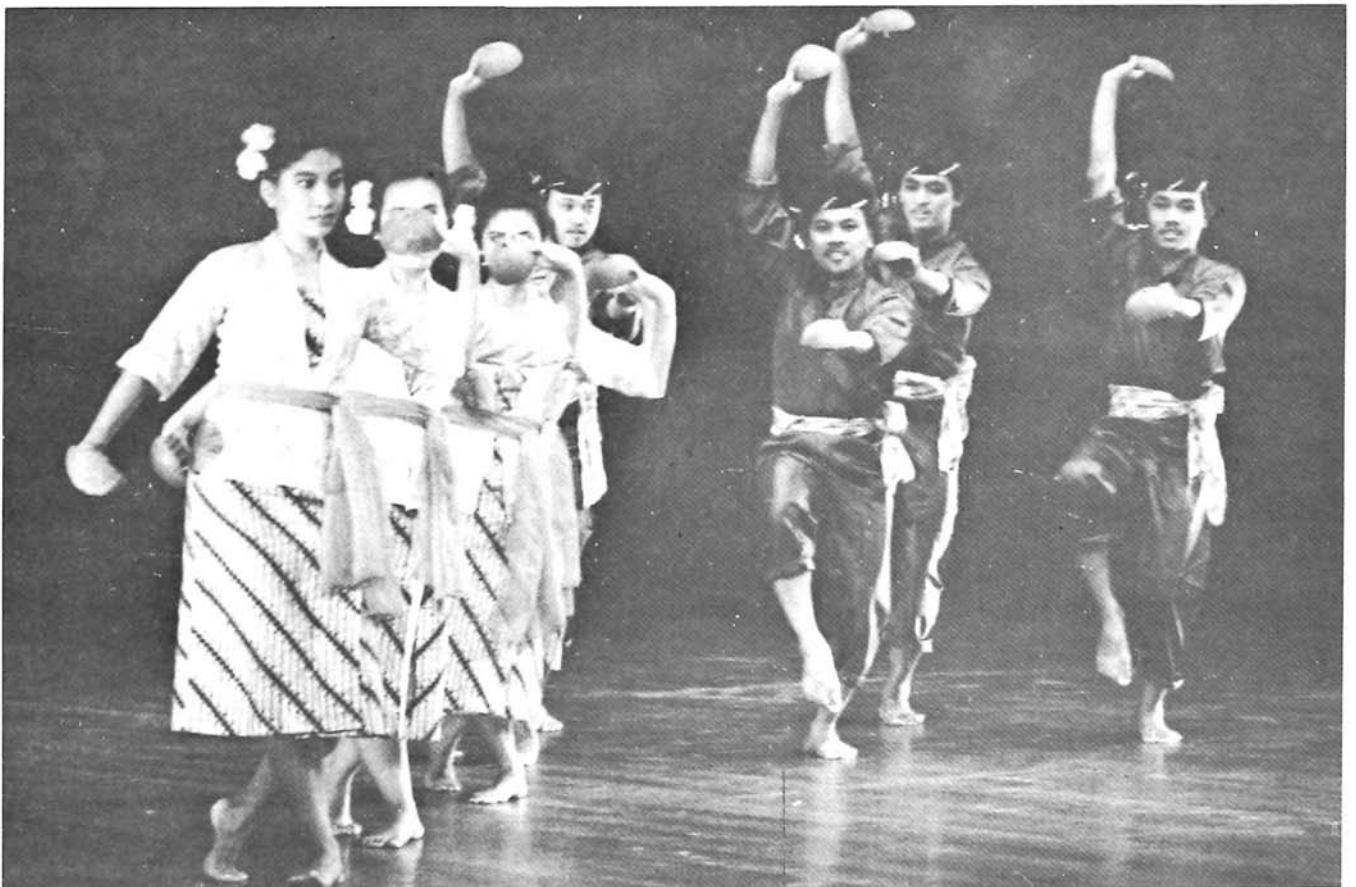


The Dynamics of the Singapore Malay Dance : A Preliminary Study

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Tari Tempurung (Coconut Shell Dance) by Sriwana, the most prominent Malay Cultural group in Singapore. The dance shows young lovers dancing happily with coconut shells.

Although Malays form only 14.6 per cent of the total population of 2.6 million in Singapore, Malay dance has, since the 1950s, become one of the three components of the national dance used as a major cultural symbol.

The other minority group, the Indians, in actual fact, make up an even smaller percentage, 6.4 in the 1980 Singapore census. However, Indian dance, together with Chinese and Malay dance forming an entity, was launched during the anti-yellow culture campaign at the height of the anti-colonialism campaign in the mid-1950s. The trinity of dance thus has been used ever since at the numerous functions organized by the government, educational institutions, schools, social cultural bodies, and all kinds of grassroot organizations.

To understand the characteristics of Malay dance fully, one must examine closely the nature of the creative process of the art form, sources of ideas and aesthetic values, social purposes of performance, interaction between different cultural groups and the observable microlevel practices within the various dance groups of the Malay community. I have elsewhere dealt with the nature of forms of interaction between Indian, Malay and Chinese dance groups¹. In this article, I shall concentrate on the evolution of Malay dance since the 1950s, factors on the development of Malay Dance and features of Malay dance in contemporary Singapore.

This study is based extensively on the long years of attending Malay and multicultural dance presentations, informal interactions with numerous dancers, choreographers, organizers, cultural administrators of the government and Malay organizations. I have also participated in the

organizing of activities by Malay cultural groups, providing opportunity to listen to discussions on dance, culture and ideas and to observe the informal interaction among the activities behind the scene.

Cultural Background of the Malay Community in Singapore

Malay is a term used to refer to a large group of people, in the Southeast Asian region, who settled in Singapore. Whether they are Minangkabau, Redjang, Batak, Orang Asli, Javanese, Baweanese or other groups of sea-nomads, they are also labelled as "Malay"

The first batch of early day Malay immigrants were from Johore, Malacca, Penang and Riau. They came to seek the economic opportunities provided by the newfound island administered by the British at the beginning of the 19th century. Many were employed by the uniformed services.

The Javanese who came after the mid-19th century were craftsmen, merchants, pilgrim brokers and labourers. During the second world war, about 10,000 of the Javanese conscript labourers were sent to Singapore. Later, an even larger number of Javanese entered Singapore from Malaysia. Many of the labourers, who were illiterate and unskilled, managed to get only the low-waged urban jobs. A great number of these immigrants were accommodated in the squatter settlements or Pondok, the communal houses.

It is important to note that they migrated as individuals. Most of them were unrelated by kinship, unlike the Chinese immigrants who had the clan associations to help them settle down. In the course of migration to Singapore the distinctive cultural features of the Minangkabau,

Redjang, Batak, Orang Asli, Javanese, Baweanese or other groups gradually faded away and the court traditions of Java, Sumatra or Malaya also gradually became irrelevant. But at least these early Malay immigrants shared the same Malay language and the same religion, Islam. Being a minority and predominantly a social group without economic power, the Malays did not have many extravagant theatrical forms as compared to the ballet, concerts of the Europeans, Indian Dance or Chinese Opera. The Bangsawan performances were far in between and theatrical dance presentation practically did not exist.

Evolution of Malay Dance Since the 1950s in Singapore

In the early 1950s, Malay dance could be seen mainly by the non-Malays at the "amusement parks", as a form of entertainment. The "Dancing Halls" provided live music and dance hostesses while the public, who were interested in dancing with the girls, had to pay a small fee to enter the halls. They were mainly Tari Mak Inang, Pulau Kapai and Selendang Mayang. These social dances, although largely improvised by the participants, enabled the public to get acquainted with Malay music and dance. However, it was not uncommon to see Malay dance on ceremonial occasions within the Malay community, such as in wedding parties, the clearing of woodlands, the beginning of fishing season, etc.

Similar to other ethnic groups in Singapore, it was the anti-colonialism campaign of the mid-50s that stimulated the popularization of Malay dance and the performing arts in general. The wave of independence sweeping across Africa and Asia awakened the people of many



Photo shows Madame Liauw Tjen Yan (right, front row) conducting a dance class for young dancers.

colonized nations. Singapore and Malaya, longing for the days when they could be freed from the British, launched their vigorous anti-colonialism campaigns, in the mid-50s. The people thus expressed themselves in political campaigns, social movements, literary writing, music, drama and dance. Numerous cultural organizations, student bodies, arts associations, even the workers' unions, were all actively involved in the campaign of creating the "New Malaya Culture", a "new culture" that includes all the cultural elements of the Chinese, Malays, and Indians.

As for Malay dance, it was Sriwana, a newly formed cultural organization that gave it a new life. Founded on July 24, 1955, Sriwana's initial objective was to popularize Keroncong music but soon expanded

its scope and became the most influential Malay cultural group of the time. Together with other Malay associations, Sriwana organized stage shows where Malay songs and dances were presented. These charity performances were mainly held to raise funds for the poor who could not afford the school fees. Thus these activities encouraged young people to learn Malay dance.

The choreography of the dances performed during this period consisted of basic formations of circles, ovals, ellipses and triangles. Sriwana realized that if Malay dance was going to achieve a higher artistic standard, it was necessary to seek help from the professional dance instructors from the neighbouring countries. The two choreographers Sriwana invited from Indonesia, Tengku Yuhanis and Liauw Tjen Yan

(or Liu Chun Wai), had far reaching effects. The intricate steps and musical styles introduced broadened the repertoire of Malay cultural associations considerably. Dances they introduced to the Singapore audience included *Gunung Sayang*, *Tanjong Katong*, *Serampang Duabelas*, *Baju Kurung*, *Bunga Tanjung* and *Tempurung*. These were mainly dances of the Minangkabau with the tambourine as one of the key instruments. Later, Madam Supenah Somod from Indonesia and Mr. Zainal Abbas from Malaysia were engaged too, to train the aspiring young members of Sriwana.

Significant Element of National Culture : Malay Dance in the 60s

Malaya attained independence in 1957. Its success inspired Singapore

to seek the same status but few were convinced that a small island such as Singapore could ever be viable as an independent nation. In 1959, Singapore was granted full internal self-government under the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew. The new Singapore eagerly introduced a programme of active social reform and nation-building. S. Rajaratnam, senior leader of the ruling People's Action Party, responded to the call made by the people in Singapore and Malaya to create a "New Malaya Culture". During his term as the first Minister of Culture, he implemented many projects aimed at speeding up the creation of the said "new culture".

One of these projects was to mobilize the Chinese, Malay, Indians and "Western" cultural organizations to stage free performances collectively all over the island. This project, on the one hand, encouraged the Malay groups to present their dances more frequently and more artistically, and on the other hand, promote cross-cultural understanding between the Malays and the non-Malays.

It was during this period when Madam Liauw Tjan Yan was in Singapore that a large number of Chinese dance lovers took up Malay dance. Even in the cultural shows presented by Chinese schools, arts associations or workers' unions, there were usually Malay and Indian dances performed by the Chinese. The Malay dance groups too, being exposed to Chinese and Indian dance as well as Western ballets in the joint performances organized by the Ministry of Culture, further appreciated the aesthetic values of other dance cultures.

In 1962, dancers of Sriwana choreographed new items for the Southeast Asian Cultural Festival hosted by the Singapore government. The creation of these new dances :



Mohd Na'aim Pani (right), founder of the Rian Dance Group, performs in "Arjuna", a dance drama which he also choreographed.

"Tari Nelayan" (Fishermen Dance), "Tari Petani" (Farmers' Dance) and "Tari Payung" (Umbrella Dance) marked a new step forward for the Singapore Malay choreographers. They now had the necessary experience and confidence to create dances of their own to express their feelings and ideas.

Amid the movement of cross cultural fertilization, Francis Yeo, an amateur ballet dancer trained by the Singapore Ballet Academy in 1963 choreographed a Malay dance called "The Harvest", incorporation balletic steps. The surprising result of the positive reception given

by the audience encouraged the choreographers of Sriwana to experiment with more creative choreography. The products of this period included *Tari Gembira* (Happy Dance), *Tari Lenggang Remaja* (Teenager Dance), *Tari Lenggang Puteri* (Princess Dance) and *Tari Belaian Kasih* (Dance of Love). It was reported that *Tari Gembira* had obvious Chinese dance flavour while in *Tari Buluh Serirama* (Melody of the Bamboo), Indian dance influence was apparent. *Tari Lenggang Kangkong*, used jazz music, and was naturally considered very avant garde at that time!

The Malay Dance at Grassroot Level in the 70s

Besides Sriwana, there were also several other Malay organizations actively involved in the promotion of performing arts. These included *Perkumpulan Seni Melayu* (Malay Art Association), *Taman Bacaan-Pemuda Pemudi Melayu* (Malay Youth Library Association), *Persatuan Persuratan Pemuda-Pemudi Melayu* (Malay Youth Literary Association), *Pasukan Kawalan* (Watch Group) and *Semangat Baru* (New Spirit).

Two major government-supported dance companies were set up to promote dance at grassroot level and to showcase Singapore talent to foreign dignitaries at state functions. These were the part-time National Dance Company of the Ministry of Culture in 1970 and the full-time People's Association Dance Group in 1971 (which started as a part-time company in 1968). Together with the annual Youth Festival organized by the Ministry of Education, and the

many community centres' dance groups, Malay dance, like other dance forms in Singapore, cultivated a new generation of audience throughout the decade. The trinity of dance (Chinese, Indian and Malay) was then firmly established.

The National Dance Company since its inception, always presented the standard package of Chinese, Indian and Malay dance in its cultural shows. Attempts were made to present all the three forms in one single dance drama or non-narrative dance. Examples include the most frequently performed "Unity in Rhythm" and "Fisherfolk Suite". The former was collectively choreographed by Madam Lee Shu Fen, Miss Som Said and Madam Madhavi Khrishnan. Using drums of the Chinese, Malay and Indian, the choreographers successfully blended the dance into a unifying style that was much appreciated by the local and international audiences. Less successful was the dance drama "Fisherfolk Suite" choreographed by Madhavi Krishnan, Mohd Na'aim

Pani and Wong Tew Chin, mainly because of the unconvincing thin storyline and disjoint choreography².

In the process of popularizing the "cultural dance" of all the ethnic groups, the People's Association probably played a more significant role because of its active out-reaching programmes, bringing free open air performances to housing estates all over the island. Equally important is the wide network of community centres and the dance classes or dance groups which operated under them. To ensure that anyone who wants to learn dance has the opportunity, the dance classes conducted at the community centres charged only a nominal fee. This proved to be a worthwhile policy as the People's Association's affiliated groups attracted over a thousand participants.

Some of these groups, backed by the community centres administratively and financially, led by young and talented choreographers were able to make a name for themselves. Aljunied Community Centre Dance Troupe, headed by Lee Siew Kim, majored in experimental dance while Marine Parade Community Centre Dance Group, nurtured by Low Mei Yoke, received consistent praise from the serious critics. Cairnhill Community Centre has several dance groups: the Indian group is guided by Neila Sathyalingam, Tay Hong Lim coaches the Chinese group, Chew Seok Choon leads the ballet group and the Malay group's leader is Mohd Ali Sungip. With a notable teacher Ng Siew Beng, Telok Ayer Hong Lim Green Community Centre Dance Troupe, specialized in Chinese dance. The two community centres that won a high reputation for their promotion of Malay dance are River Valley and Ulu Pandan, with Mohd. Khairi Supani and Mohd Salleh B Buang as choreographers respectively.



Renowned Indonesian choreographer, Tom Ibnur (left), is seen assisting a dancer for a Singapore Festival of Arts performance.



ASEAN dance workshops are one of the main sources of learning for the Singaporean Malay dancers.

For the much publicized Youth Festival, many school children were able to enjoy themselves in the glamorous costumes and glittering theatrical lighting, be it in Malay, Indian or Chinese dance. These dance performances, although routine, are an important educational tool to stimulate the creativity and cultural identity of these young people. The packaging of the national dance trinity constantly reminds the students the reality of multiculturalism in Singapore.

If popularization of Malay dance was an achievement in the 1970s, then artistic stagnancy was an illness that needed to be cured. In those days, Malay dance performances meant the repetition of a few familiar steps in familiar formations. In "Tari Payung" (Umbrella Dance), the female dancers use umbrellas to shield from the sun and rain as well as use it to entice the boys they adore. In "Tari Kipas" (Fan Dance), the girls dance to the Inang rhythm, with fans in their hands, forming various

patterns on stage. "Tari Tempurung" (Coconut Shell Dance) shows young lovers dancing happily with the coconut shell. "Tari Tudung Saji", (Food-cover dance) using two types of music: "Asli Tudung Saji" and "Joget, Rentah Seratus Enam", showcases the multiple usage of the traditional Malay food-cover. "Tari Piring" (Saucer Dance), probably derived from Sumatra, displays the dancers' skill in handling saucers. "Tari Selendang" (Scarf Dance) performed to the tune of Selendang Mayang with an Inang Melody, symbolizes good manners and womanly grace. Other popular dances include "Selamat Datang (Welcome Dance)", "Tari Lilin" (Candle Dance), Tari Belaian Kasih (Lovers' Dance), Tari Jinak-Jinak Merpati (Dance of the Tamed Pigeons) and "Tari Pengantin" (Wedding Dance).

The set movements, music, and floor patterns of Malay dance, though an effective means of expressing ethnicity and cultural identity when repeatedly performed, failed to

sustain interest in the audience. Fortunately the situation was soon remedied in the 1980s as the Asean Festival of Performing Arts and the much publicized Singapore Festival of Dance was held one year after another, in 1981 and 1982.

New Sources of Learning in the 80s

The first Asean Festival of Performing Arts held in Jakarta in February 1981 was a grand dance event in the region. It gave dance lovers the rare chance of seeing the top dancers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, all perform together. The Singapore delegates were greatly impressed by the inventive choreographies of I.G.B. Perbawa, S.S. Djoko, I. Made Jimat, Nurdin, Dedy Luthan and Widhi Sumarno from Indonesia, Ahmad Umar Hj. Ibrahim from Malaysia and Alice Buenaventura from the Philippines.

The young Malay dancers and choreographers from Singapore witnessed for the first time the colourful spectrum of dances of the Indonesian archipelago. They realized that Malay dance had a pool of resources which they could utilize. Mohd Na'aim Pani, inspired by performances seen at the Asean Festival, choreographed a dance drama, "Arjuna", for his newly formed dance group, Rina. It was premiered during the first Singapore Festival of Dance, presented by the National Theatre Trust in March 1982. It received favourable comments. In five evenings, this festival presented 39 items from 27 local dance groups. The cross cultural presentations compelled the audience and participants to cross the ethnic barrier and interact socially and culturally.

Most choreographers and dancers were at their best in this historic cultural event. The overwhelming support they received gave them a sense of pride, at the same time it provoked them to think seriously about the future direction. It was also obvious that, compared to other ethnic dances, with a few exceptions, the choreography of most Malay dance instructors lacked imaginative ideas and creativity, although the quality of their performers generally improved in terms of costuming and movement training. Realizing their shortcomings, they began to search for new paths of expression vigorously.

In the next few years, National Theatre Dance Circle, Sriwana, the Singapore Phoenix Dance Troupe, People's Association and other Malay cultural organizations, at different stages invited several Indonesian and Malaysian choreographers to Singapore to conduct workshops or



Deddy Luthan from Indonesia (left, front row) conducting a Minangkabau dance workshop at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

training programmes. These included Ahmad Umar Hj. Ibrahim from Malaysia, Abay Subardja, Deddy Luthan, Nasrun Darussalam, Tom Ibnur and M. Miroto from Indonesia, as well as the Indonesian dance doyen, Liauw Tjen Yan who had migrated to Hong Kong. Children's dance competitions and dance

classes, conducted by local choreographers, were also organized. Som Said, a young choreographer of Sriwana and the National Dance Company, went to Jogjakarta to study under Bagong Kusudiardjo, the highly respected Indonesian choreographer.

Of the many workshops conducted by Malaysian and Indonesian choreographers, the Sumatran Dance Workshop organized by the National Theatre Dance Circle in March 1983 generated the most public interest. It had the widest impact within the dance community. Lasting for ten days this workshop invited two top Sumatran choreographers, Deddy Luthan and Nasrun Darussalam to give lectures on various aspects of Malay dance and to teach a selected number of Minangkabau dances. The multiracial participants, during the process of learning the energetic, forceful movements of some of these dances, began to fully appreciate the wide variety of Minangkabau dances. The old idea of Malay dance as slow, gentle and monotonous was replaced by the new image which is dynamic and creative. Many Malay dance



Malay dance of the National Dance Company entitled "Orchid", specially choreographed for the 5th ASEAN Festival in 1985.

practitioners then realized the importance of absorbing the “militant” aspect of Minangkabau dances in their choreography. Some began to examine the possibility of blending silat, the Malay traditional martial art into their dance. Others decided that their future choreographical approach would be more liberal by fusing the movement patterns of other cultures whenever necessary³. After all, Minangkabau dances assimilated movement patterns other than Sumatran.

The interest in vitalizing Malay dance was intensified when Tom Arison Ibnur was invited by the Singapore Festival of Arts to choreograph for an evening of Malay dance. It was participated by all Malay dance groups in Singapore. Malay society places considerable emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the social circle of kins, neighbours and friends. Therefore competition between dance groups or drama groups is less intense than other ethnic groups. Tom Ibnur’s youthful zeal and dancing skill were inspiring. The many Minangkabau dances not seen by the Singaporean audience before were technically demanding as they required remarkable agility and alertness. The male dancers were especially pleased as they were introduced in many impressive new dances. For example, in the “Tari Piring” (Saucer Dance), the boys had to click against the saucer rhythmically with a special ring to produce the Spanish castanet type of sound effect. They also skillfully juggle their plates with complicated dance steps.

The immense experience gained from the many dance workshops and Tom Ibnur’s production by the participants yielded fruitful results. In the Malay dance productions that

followed, one could easily detect fresh choreographic ideas. Som Said, upon her return from Bagong Kusudiardjo’s training course had this to say: “I have no intention to stage authentic Javanese dance here but I will adapt some traditional Indonesian dance steps for my choreography. Even Indonesia itself has gone through the process of absorption and fusion of Islamic and Hindu cultures with the local one. Is Singapore not the same, a melting pot?”

Nongchik Ghani, the doyen of Malay dance in Singapore agreed and cited a historical document to support his view. “At the first Malay cultural congress held in Malacca in the mid-50s, a resolution was passed suggesting that Malay culture could accept the elements of non-Malay culture that are suitable and do not oppose it. Therefore although Malay dance can absorb suitable elements of other cultures, this must be done with great care to retain the flavour of Malayness!”

Mohd Salleh B. Buang added

“Whatever experiment we are involved in, we make an effort to develop an individual style that is identifiably Singaporean. Our Malay culture has developed out of the varied cultural traditions of the migrants, but it is the contemporary urban life that makes us different from our ancestors.”

However, if Singapore Malay choreographers are serious about developing a dance style with distinctive characteristics, they must not heavily rely on ready-made music in the shops. The choreographers must work closely with composers or musicians. They must be able to improvise or arrange music specially to the dances they create. They should also explore the possibility of adapting poetry, short stories or drama written by local writers into dance or dance drama.

Nobody knows yet the result of the artistic experiments of the young generation of Malay choreographers in Singapore. It will probably take years to develop anyway. Traditional Malay dance, whether derived from Malaysia or Indonesia, will certainly



Ahmad Umar Hj. Ibrahim from Malaysia (left) conducting a workshop on Malay dance for the Singapore Ballet Academy.

continue to serve its social and cultural functions. The performance of Malay dance are held either in conjunction with a variety of secular rituals such as the National Day Celebration, National Dance Festival, Youth Festival and Festival of Arts or ceremonial rituals such as wedding parties. Those who present them and those who attend them are bound together socially and culturally. The social setting of these performances also display and reinforce existing social relations. Though the format of theatrical Malay dance is familiar, it enhances their cultural identity and Malayness. Together with Indian dance and Chinese dance, Malay dance plays a part in the drama of Singapore's multicultural society. ■

Footnotes

1. See Chua (1989) for the discussion of forms of interaction between the different ethnic groups in Singapore during the past decades. The changing patterns reflect the complex development of the cultural framework within which the artistes organize their creative activities.
2. The story of "Fisherfolk Suite" depicts the peaceful harmonious way of life in a fishing village in Singapore in the 1950s. It combines the music, rhythms and dance steps of the three main communities in Singapore, namely: Malay, Indian and Chinese. Before dawn, the fishermen gather together and set out to sea. They strive with strength and unity despite the rough seas. On the beach the womenfolk mend their nets and wait patiently for the return of their loved ones. The market comes alive as the fisherfolk return and sell their catch to potential customers. Being superstitious, the fisherfolk are quickly enchanted by an Indian fortune teller who comes by. Young girls, especially, gather round her asking her to tell them about their future husbands. In the evening the fisherfolk gather around and, in a joyous and harmonious mood, dance and celebrate the day's good catch.
3. This is based on an interview conducted on the 31st of March 1983 by the writer at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, after the closing ceremony of the workshop.

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