

# The Fading Art of Ritual Saba Dance

## Preserving Traditional Medical thru Mystical Skills

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**Abstract**— This ritual dance can be seen in Ulu Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia. Saba' Dance history can first be tracked more than 150 years ago, and it was founded by Tok Shaman Smudge or Tok Bomoh Comot. During this period, the Saba Dance was performed for medical purposes such as treating diseases often related to mystical elements such as supernatural entities and entertainment. The legend related to this Saba was that Saba was a tree that grew in a garden filled with flowers in the sky. The garden was a place for the gods and goddesses to mix and play. Materials such as peak oil (Saba) which was used as the main ingredient, roasted, incense and filled with assorted tools spirit used in this dance. The dancers would perform dances around the tree Saba and they were accompanied by traditional music and sounds produced from bamboo called 'Bug'.. The dance is a combination of three forms of art; songs, music and dance. Traditional instruments such as the Child Threshold (bamboo), Children Cerating or Anak Cerating, tambourine (large drum) and flute (flute) made the orchestration of music, while songs were sung in contemporary verse. The dancers will dance to the embodiment of animals. Often these Games were held after the harvest, and also after recovering from any illness. This dance is believed to have existed in the state of Terengganu, situated in the coast of Peninsula Malaysia since the time of the religious transition Hindu – Buddhist – Islam archipelago of Circa 13 AD. Presentation will begin with incantations, perasap all musical instrument and then Red Duang Singer or the main character of this dance will swipe “children hermit”. Mohamed Najib (2009), referring to various factors that caused the erosion of traditional cultural activities, the culture of the present society is the main reason why there are fewer traditional arts activists around. Comparing this to the life in urban areas, the word ‘our’ is rarely used as individualism, causing the diminishing of ‘Malay fraternity because the word refers to the gathering of Malay and when the Malays no longer gather among themselves, the culture and arts traditional activities would go away gradually. This paper will be focusing on it historical and restoration. As we all know, most of the Malay traditional dances are slowly becoming extinct. That is why we have to save and preserve all of them from becoming extinction. Indeed, as a Malay that lives in Malaysia and in Terengganu notably, the sense of pride of these Malay traditional dances especially traditional ritual dances should exist since it symbolizes the unique art and highest degree of creativity. Moreover, this research paper will also act as an effort towards the traditional dance restoration as well as the preserving of the Malay ritual dance that were nearly extinct.

**Keywords:** Ritual Dance, Preserving, Mystical, Traditional Medical.

## 1. Introduction

The state of Terengganu is located in the East Peninsula of Malaysia; with Kelantan and Pahang situated to the north and south of Terengganu respectively. Although these three states are located close to each other, there are differences in terms of arts and culture. Terengganu is well-known for the art of traditional dance form-gamelan, rodat, ulek mayang, Pulai,, Balai to name a few.

The main scope of the research and discussion of this paper is the Saba Dance which traditionally is a form of a dance with mystical elements that was the belief and way of life for the people living in Ulu Terengganu in the past. This particular dance is slowly being eradicated and is no longer practiced as a form as traditional way of healing patient. This dance, however, must be preserved seeing how it has historical elements beginning from the time Hinduism and Buddhism before the coming of Islam to this land. During such time, the Saba dance was a way of healing a patient seeing that the people depended solely on the Tok Pawang or Sharman for treatment. Furthermore, the fact that these people stayed far from the city in the early 1920s made it impossible for them to depend on modern hospital. As alternative the people get this sort of treatment for their ailments.

## II. History of Saba Dance

The Saba Dance is believed to have started since the introduction of Buddhism followed by Hinduism to the people of Malay Peninsula at that time. The Malay community at that time still believed in animism which is beliefs in supernatural elements such as ghosts. It was this belief that had steered them to choose the Saba Dance as medical treatment alternative. It was this belief that had steered them to choose the Saba Dance as a medical treatment alternative.

Animism is the belief system related to the worshipping of spirits that inhabit the supernatural world. According to Malinowshi (1954,18): Animism refers to the beliefs of humans in supernatural objects in their surroundings. It is naturalistic and is closely connected with the ecological system of the surrounding environment. In general, animists believe that all objects or living things in this world like trees, caves, animals, birds and many such things have spirits or even ghosts. Therefore their behavior in everyday life would be governed by taboos connected with these supernatural objects. The culture and way of life of the people there that still believed strongly in superstitious things caused the Saba Dance to still be the choice for medical treatment.

With the old generation gone, and the new generation are educated formally based on Islamic teachings, the

community is no longer interested in practicing this traditional treatment practice. The Saba Dance is only being performed for cultural shows for tourists or visiting foreign dignitaries to this country. Sadly, the Saba Dance is also losing its attraction as compared to other traditional dances.

### III. Problems of the Research

Initially, the Saba Dance was a dance with mystical elements that was dominated by a Tok Bomoh Comot or The Dirty Shaman for medical purposes. Since during that time there was no modern medical treatment available, the traditional method was seen to be the only choice and was in great demand. The Saba Dance at that time was performed as a healing process to heal a mystic related illness such as man-made illness (santau) caused by ill hearted people or enemies. The treatment sometimes would take up to two days and two nights and it was interesting since it involved dance, singing, music and worshipping. Although it was a form of mystique and superstition, the entire process was entertaining. Such belief is solely fading and the community now opt for modern medicine as the main choice for medical treatment. In fact, the songs played during the Saba Dance no longer holds a place in the people's heart on the contrary they are now viewed to have negative values. The Saba Dance now is only performed in certain areas with small groups that live in rural and secluded districts.

To make matter worse, the dance is slowly becoming extinct in this modern era where the community in this area, especially the younger generation, are prone towards songs that are more up-to-date and modern. Even though they no longer practice this form of medical treatment, this activity should be kept alive as a cultural heritage that must be exposed to the coming generation. What more since the Saba Dance is unlike other traditional dances that must be given due attention.

### IV. Objective of the Research

The research focuses on the artistic values found in the dance as well as the Saba songs. This is so since the songs played during the traditional Saba Dance proves that animism, psychology and mystical elements can be found in the songs. Nonetheless, the performance of the dance does include moral values plus it entertains the audience. The focus here is to identify the uniqueness of this dance art form that can be found in the Malay community of Ulu Terengganu compared to other communities.

Apart from this, there are other aspects that must be given attention in this research, which is in terms of introducing the Saba game itself is only done in general. The focus of this research is also to determine and identify how the Saba game is played and the characteristics as well as the themes embedded in the dance performance.

### V. Literature Review

The Saba Dance is a method using performing arts elements to treat patients suffering from diseases such as man-made illness (santau) or black magic. For the older generation and lived in the rural areas, diseases such as these cannot be cured using modern methods. Often they received

treatment from the shaman or medicine man. According to Zahari Daud (1982:102), diseases caused by disturbance from the supernatural being such as ghosts, ghouls, genies, Satan and others. Zahari referred this to the traditional Malay culture, emotional disturbance to man that is not related to what was practiced back in the day.

Rohana Yusoff (1994:2) stated that traditional medical treatment was form of treatment inherited from previous generation up to this day. This sort of treatment involves the person that is to give treatment and the patient that hopes for some sort of healing. Haliza Mohd Riji (2000:17) stated that the Malays beliefs were basically influenced by Hindu-Buddha religions as well as Islam. The impact of such influence now forms that general world-view of the Malays and the world-view of the Malays is also the world-view of the traditional Malay medical practitioners..

Abd. Razak Abd. Karim (2006:36) stated that there are a variety of treatment found in Malay medicine that are used in healing certain illnesses. The illnesses are often divided into two categories-external illness that can be seen with the naked eye and internal illness that is the opposite. Therefore, the type of treatment depends on the illness that the patient suffers from.

### VI. Medical Purposes

According to Che Wan Norsaidi bt. Che Wan Abd. Rahman or better known as Kak Zah who happens to be a practitioner who has popularized the Saba Dance, it all began with Tok Bomoh Comot or The Dirty Shaman and the dance solely for medical purposes.

During those times, the dance was performed as a healing process to heal mystical-related illnesses such as man-made illness (santau) caused by ill hearted people or enemies Santau – is a charm made from some kind of deadly poison from bamboo hair or human hair, coupled with magical incantations. It is used to harm other people. The dance was also performed to celebrate the patients who were cured from such illness. To celebrate it, the family members of the patient would prepare a food feast and the whole village would be invited to the Saba dance in their house. The length of the dance is depended on the period the patient had suffered the illness and till the time the patient was cured. If the illness was serious, the dance performance would be longer and could dragged to the next day. During the ceremony, the shaman would read his spell as a prayer for the patient and his family for good health thereafter.

The ceremony would start with the spell, together with playing all the musical instruments that had been rubbed with smoke. Abang Penduang, the singer or the main character would touch the 'Anak Umang'. Anak Umang is a unique traditional musical instrument made from bamboo with a hole at the bottom, attached with a few strings that are tightened to it. To play the instrument, one has to rub the string tightened to the bamboo to another string that is also tightened to another piece of bamboo, as in playing the violin. Other instrument used are 'anak ambang', made of bamboo too, 'anak cerating', 'rebana' and 'seruling' all of these played together just like in an orchestra (Nazlin Emieza Ngah & Norlaila Ibrahim, 2011).

## VII. Incantation for Patient

According to the legend the Saba Dance, it was believed that there was a tree that was planted in a garden way up in paradise. This garden was the place where the gods and goddesses would enjoy themselves with games. The performance would start with incantations, the smoking of the musical instruments followed by the 'anak Umang' being played by Abang Peduang, the main singer or character of the dance. It is during that time that the shaman would cast incantations to get rid of the evil spirits that is in the patient's body.

## VIII. Body of Research

This research is carried out to analysis diseases that cannot be treated through the means of modern medicine. It is known that health is vital for humans to enjoy a fruitful life. There is a saying in Arab world that says, a good health is like a crown on a healthy person's head. Nobody can see it other than an unhealthy person. According to Adi Hashman (2011:29) this saying means that a person will only appreciate good health once he falls ill.

According to William Howells (1948:142) through Mohd Fauzi Yaacob, health is a state of unique balance. A person will only contract a disease when that balance becomes weak due to human factors itself. Disease or illness has two categories – that can be seen physically such a broken limb, a boil, tooth ache etc. The second category is caused by the spiritual side such as man-made illness which is airborne (santau), perennial heritage (saka) and diseases conjured up through a medium such as through a shaman or witch doctor. The Saba Dance is used to heal the diseases caused by the second category. The Shaman will treat the patient with the assistance of genies or supernatural beings, through Awang Peduang and the dance.

## IX. Research Methodology

This research uses fieldwork methodology that is often used by folklore researchers like Dundes (1980), Mohd Tain (1982) and Toelken (1996). According to these traditional folklore researchers, this fieldwork methodology covers three levels, which are (1) fieldwork for data collection from activists who still practice the art of storytelling, singing of folk songs and conveying of other traditional folklore elements, (2) transcribing and documenting traditional folklore materials gained from the fieldwork and (3) analyzing the data based on what is to be researched on. The research style is found to be appropriate for since the Saba dance happens to be the tradition of the people in Ulu Dungun Terengganu that has been passed down from one generation to another.

There are several specific methods used throughout the fieldwork. Among them are (1) in-dept. interviews, (2) focused group interviews and (3) unobtrusive observation. All three methods of data collection is found to be suitable in a qualitative research style (Liamputtong and Ezza: 2005). Hence, the interview for the fieldwork was conducting with the interview of the people from several villagers located in the Ulu Dungun district on specific dates throughout 2015. The entire traditional medical beliefs through the Saba Dance plays an important role in

connecting with the gods and goddesses that are belived to reside in the sky, all through the calling by Awang Peduang – which is done through several songs. If looked closely, many researches place the Saba Dance and Ulik Mayang or other traditional dances at par. However, it is quite obvious that through research, this is not to be true because the incantations and chanting in the Saba Dance is more of healing through dance.

As mentioned earlier, this research uses data collected from in-dept interviews, focused group interview and unobtrusive observation. These three data collection methods if found to be effective in this qualitative research. The interview is only conducted with a Saba Dance activist and practitioner, Che Wan Norsaidi bt. Che Wan Abd. Rahman, an active advocate of the Saba Dance. She inherited the knowledge directly from her father, Wan Abd Rahman who has been involved in this art form since the 1940s. in her village of Sungai Jengal, only Che Wan Norsaidi has the detailed knowledge about the origins of the Saba Dance. Also the fact that she is an active practitioner of this art makes the most suitable source for the accurate information.

## X. Significance Research

Based on this study, it is expected that there is interest in this study is able to:-

(i) Provide comprehensive information to the public unfamiliar to the dance of the uniqueness and abnormalities found in Saba Dance performances in Malay community of Terengganu.

(ii) Terengganu Malay community is also expected to have a wider knowledge about their own culture and customs. In addition, they should be proud of the advantages and privileges of folk dances that has been practiced over the years.

(iii) Used as a reference to all parties, especially the next generation to know and learn about the uniqueness of traditional dance in Malaysia. Although they have no experience or watch traditional dances, but the results of this study will provide some input regarding this dance to the public.

## XI. Discussion

Terengganu is well-known as a state that is rich with unique socio-cultural, with a variety of games and traditional dances that can be found here. Among the traditional games that still exist such as kite flying, top spinning, sepak raga and congkak. While the dances are like the Gamelan dance, Ulik mayang, Dance hall or Tarian Balai, and Rodat dances. But according to Che Wan Norsaidi bt. Che Wan Abd Rahman the Saba Dance is quite different because it has elements that are not the same as other dances. The combined elements of dance, music and viewed to be very unique because it is not only treats the patient but also seems to entertain the residents of the house and also the surrounding population of the area. According to some residents there, although the tradition of this treatment is no longer appropriate for the present situation, and is beginning to become extinct, it is a waste if the Saba Dance just disappears.

Many elements of interest in this dance. For example, the traditional musical instruments being played, such as its threshold (bamboo), anak cerating, tambourine and flute are used to form an orchestra, while the songs are sung in the form of tones and contemporary rhythms. A traveler from Australia said the dances were presented like baniong baby bird of anak burung baniong, baby shrimp, young cobra and several more interesting elements in terms of rhythm and lyrics. Similarly, the clothing used by dancers have designs and patterns that are really interesting by using bright colors and the unique design itself. Similarly, design and sculpture of the coconut tree where the gods goddesses play has aesthetic beauty. All of this is a combination that should be preserved so that it can be seen by future generations as well as an exposure to the tourists. In fact the Saba Dance must be preserved as a national treasure like the Kecak dance from Bali Indonesia that can have an impact on the country's economy.

## Conclusion

Finally, this article also highlights that Saba Dance has close ties with the traditions and beliefs found in traditional medicine. Having analyzed in this article, clearly highlighting the characteristics of trust through incantations. Even though now Saba Dance is practiced for mere entertainment, but the belief in the mystical is still prevalent among the older generation. The belief is it has the characteristics of spirituality (spiritual) and the supernatural. They still believe that witch doctors and shamans can cure some diseases associated with witchcraft and evil ghosts. They still believe that through the Saba Dance, it can treat and cure illnesses.

However overall Saba Dance games has been somewhat reduced because there is no place left in the community. This is because this show is said to be conflict with the values of Islam that opposes elements of superstition. Worse, the Saba Dance is not enthused by the new generation even if the dances and songs presented are quite interesting. This occurs because of the process of modernization in the local Malay community and also throughout the country. Inflow of western culture has a bad impact on the influence of music, dance and costumes in Malay culture.

Practically all of the Malay culture in the dance scene, and dressing and music is dwindling and that includes the Saba Dance. The government or authorities need to revise this art so that essential elements such as dance form, costumes, musical instruments, and lyrics in the songs be maintained. Through the studies it would be seen as a positive step if the Saba Dance popularized back will help the tourism industry in the state sector.

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