

# The Symbolic Battle of Coastal Culture in Zapin Dance in Palembang

Robby Hidajat<sup>1</sup>, Robert Budi Laksana<sup>2</sup>, Agung Suharyanto<sup>3</sup>, Wiflihani Wiflihani<sup>4</sup>, Muhammad Fabian Arrizqi<sup>5</sup>, Rully Rochayati<sup>6</sup>, Amir Razak<sup>7</sup>  
{robby.hidajat.fs@um.ac.id<sup>1</sup>, robertbudilaksana@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>, agungsuharyanto@staff.uma.ac.id<sup>3</sup>, wiflihani@unimed.ac.id<sup>4</sup>, fabian@uniss.ac.id<sup>5</sup>, rullyrochayati@gmail.com<sup>6</sup>, amirrazak@isi.ac.id<sup>7</sup>}

Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>  
PGSD Study Program, Universitas PGRI Palembang, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>  
Public Administration Study Program, Universitas Medan Area, Indonesia<sup>3</sup>  
Music Studies Program, Department of Ballet, Universitas Medan Area, Indonesia<sup>4</sup>  
Visual Communication Design Study Program, Universitas Selamat Sri, Indonesia<sup>5</sup>  
Performing Arts Education Study Program, Universitas PGRI Palembang, Indonesia<sup>6</sup>  
Department of Ethnomusicology, Institut Seni Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia<sup>7</sup>

**Abstract.** This writing aims to read the symbolic struggle of coastal culture in the Zapin dance in Palembang. Historians have highlighted many issues of power change, colonialism, and identity politics. Therefore, the focus of this study is the occurrence of conflicts in the cultural identity of the coastal communities in Palembang, South Sumatra, in the presentation of the Zapin dance, which is a symbolic fight expressed in the Zapin Malay dance and the Arabic Zapin dance. The research method used is interviews with key informants, namely traditional dancers and choreographers in Palembang, and Arabic zapin dance artists, the Al-Munawwar Palembang. The data analysis procedure starts with designing the instrument, testing the credibility of the data using triangulation, data grouping, data analysis with interpretation descriptions, and reporting. The analysis results show the occurrence of identity conflicts in coastal communities. This identity resistance is offered through the expression of the Malay zapin dance movement, the symbolic fight of the coastal community. It gives birth to social relations that strengthen the Malay identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict; dance; malay zapin; identity; primordial

## 1 Introduction

The growth of multiple hops is closely related to sociocultural, environmental, and historical aspects. In various regions in Indonesia, various types of dances, both local or the result of acculturation with foreign cultures. A kind of dance known as Zapin. This dance is trendy among people of Arab descent and has been brought to various places in the archipelago. Dance is one of the cultural traditions of the Arab community. Because it is said to have originated from tradition when fighting in the days of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, this is certainly not a natural thing, but it has an aspect of symbolism. The term used to refer to the Zapin dance was only known around the VI century AD when there was a truce with the infidels in Mecca. At that time, Sayyidina Hamzah's daughter intended to follow the Prophet Muhammad to migrate to Medina. At that time, the Prophet Muhammad saw Ja'far

and Sayyiddina Ali look happy by lifting their feet like people dancing. The following foot movement is called Al-Zafn, which means footwork [1]. The focus on footwork also implies that people of Arab descent are immigrants and have differences with local communities.

The local community in Palembang has long been separated between the Sriwijaya nobility and the sea people community. Considering that in the VII-VIII centuries, the Srivijaya kingdom intensively established relations with Chinese, Indian, and Arab traders [2]. Even the trading ports formed a distinctive civilization strengthened by the Malay language so that the growth of local communities had strong Malay legitimacy [3, pp. 80–82]. The port on the coast and the route in the pulse of the city of Palembang, the Musi River, which was initially bustling, appears to be sinking into a deserted state due to competition for control and the need for trading land. Historians use document data to read the complications of interest in establishing his influence over a trade [4, pp. 230–238].

Zapin dance entered and developed in Indonesia, especially in the coastal areas of Sumatra around the XVI-XVII centuries. This dance included Arab traders who were competitors from China, India, and western nations [5]. It should be emphasized that the arrival of Arab traders was not in a certain period or place. The appearance of the more prominent Arabs came from Hadramaut or Yemen, the southern region of the Arabian Peninsula. The arrival of merchants from Hadramaut to the XIII century. The Hadrami people occupy various areas on the coast and build communities [6]. The existence of Arab communities in various regions in Indonesia also builds communities between traders and indigenous peoples. They are reported to have started a relationship by organizing entertainment activities, making music, or dancing. Especially when there are parties. The data from archaeological research shows that in Palembang, there is a historic Arab settlement, namely the Almunawwar village. This village is inhabited by various tribes, including Al-Munawwar, Al-Habsyi, Al-Hadad, Assegaf, Al-Musawa, and Al-Kaff [7].

According to Elly, while being a Malay dancer, the Zapin dance in Palembang developed exclusively in the Arab community (Elly, interview 2021). However, the development of Zapin dance in Palembang got stronger around 1991, which was driven by the modernization of musical instruments in the Gambus ensemble. At this time, the Zapin dance in Palembang is still functioned by people of Arab descent called wong ayeb. Researchers also consider this phenomenon as a symbolic aspect. This study aims to read the phenomenon of symbolic struggle, namely the cultural conflict of local communities with historical backgrounds and immigrants of Arab descent with local communities in Palembang, South Sumatra. The term battle is not intended as a negative thing but the existence of conditions that reinforce each other's presence in an area. Of course, some conditions occur, showing competition and closing themselves off.

The symbolic battle is intended to examine things that are not naturally present but are visible signs of an inevitable conflict. The use of signs/symbols/symbols as a medium of this battle departs from the fact that human interaction is carried out through the use of characters. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how humans construct meaning and social structure through conversation. Humans give sense to everything that will control their lives. Therefore, humans behave based on the meanings that other people give to themselves through interactions. The intention is then interpreted based on the self-concept, which is influenced by the sociocultural structure. The research focus on this topic has not been examined more deeply, even that associated with dance from the people's perspective in Palembang.

Given that no one pays attention to this discussion. The conflicts that historians focus on are problems of change in power, colonialism, and identity politics. Therefore, this study examines the symbolic struggle expressed in the Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab dances in Palembang.

This article describes the Zapin dance that developed in Palembang, namely as a dance that coexists with other local dances. This consideration reinforces the discussion of the topic based on Nurdin's writing entitled: Development of the Function and Form of Arabic Zapin Dance in Palembang City. Robby Hidajat et al.'s reports titled: Meaning of Symbolical Space of Zapin Dance to Malay People. This paper presents the symbolic meaning of the Malay Zapin dance related to its aesthetic values [8].

## **2 Research Method**

The research method used is qualitative by emphasizing descriptive analysis. The theory used is the theory of conflict, namely conflicts that occur in society openly or symbolically to build particular strengths in maintaining their existence [9]. The data mining technique used interviews with key informants, Anggraini Nurul Laili (70 years), a traditional dancer and choreographer in Palembang, Sarif (43 years), an Arabic Zapin dance artist from the Al-Munawwar Palembang, and Yuyun (24 years) a teacher of cultural arts. In High School. Observations on the appearance of Zapin Arab and Zapin Melayu dances by reviewing documents considered relevant to the studied topic. Data analysis starts with the instrument's design, testing the data's credibility using triangulation [10], grouping data, analyzing data with interpretation descriptions, and reporting.

## **3 Result and Discussion**

### **3.1 Palembang's Social Conditions**

Palembang is very well known too. Even the existence of the Sriwijaya kingdom made this area an international conversation, especially in the VII century. Apart from that, Palembang also grew as a cultural environment for rural communities along the Musi river. With the river, the city of Palembang was vivacious [11, pp. 69–76]. Bandar Palembang is a powerful attraction, so Palembang has become a multiethnic area. This multiethnic society is the dynamic driving force of the economy in Palembang, so the current condition of Palembang appears as a vibrant city, as shown in the red colour on the Ampera Bridge. Two icons strengthen Palembang, (1) the Musi river, with its eight tributaries which are the lifeblood of the people in Palembang. In this environment, a pluralistic society is formed, which is the forerunner to developing the characteristics of the metropolis.

Since the past, this area, known as a trading city, has been inhabited by various ethnic groups; Chinese, Indian, and Arab [11, pp. 69–76]. This multiethnic imprint is still felt visually, socially, or culturally. Various aspects appear to be the genetic expression of the multiracial ethnicity, including in the educational environment, different multiethnic touches can be (2) The Sriwijaya Kingdom, namely the environment that formed the local community, was prestigious as the nobility because behind this local dynasty there was a great power strengthened from Java [12]. The Palembang aristocrats, for decades, have continued to seek identity so that the past roots of Srivijaya's glory continue to be transformed into Palembang Darussalam. It is an attempt to reinforce conventional and Islamic forces.

### 3.2 Zapin Dance in Palembang

The growth of performing arts in Palembang also follows this new identity pattern. Thus, Palembang seems to have sociocultural strengths, which are often not generally read. That is:

- The Arab community entered the territory of the Malay community with the power of Islamic da'wah, one of which was present at the Zapin Arab dance. Zapin Melayu is acculturation with a traditional local dance called Bedana, a typical dance of the Palembang Malay community before the Majapahit kingdom. The princess dances the Banana dance with the property of ladders and ornate metal fingers. A dance that functions as joy in the harvest season. The combination of Zapin Arab and Bedana dances gave birth to an expression of the Malay community called Zapin Melayu. In fact, in the 1990s, a dance developed with the inclusion of single organ music (Elektune) as a form of entertainment danced by both men and women. The development of the growth of the Arab Zapin dance was refuted by the Arab Peranakan community in Al-Munawwar Village. Its existence is exclusive, maintaining that the performers are male and cannot be studied by people outside their community. Zapin Arab provides reinforcement and proof of the Islamic religiosity of the Palembang community (Syrif, interview 2022).
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If you pay attention to the explanation about Palembang, it can be seen that there are two opposing forces, namely the Arabic Zapin Dance and the Malay Zapin Dance. Even though, on this occasion, it is not discussed as something negative. The researcher focuses on the Arabic Zapin Dance as an expression of the coastal community and the Malay Zapin Dance, which can penetrate the social area of the Palembang community in South Sumatra. Zapin Arab, as a kinetic expression, represents the social movement of the people of Arab descent who survive in Al-Munawwar Village. Zapin Arab has a spiritual power that strengthens the people of Palembang. The artistic phenomenon that expresses the Zapin dance has its strengths. The Arab-descent community from Hadramaut, Yemen, continues to preserve its Islamic principles. In contrast, the Malay community in Palembang strengthens its local cultural identity through the Malay Zapin dance to the interior.

### 3.3 Symbolic Conflict in Coastal Communities from the Expression of the Malay and Arabic Zapin Dance Movements

The analysis results show a symbolic conflict in coastal communities, indicated by the expression of the Zapin Malay and Zapin Arab dance movements. This is imagined from the fact that two spirits make up the people of Palembang that harbour the seeds of social tension, namely 1) the Musi River, as a symbol of economic power, and the transmission of dynamic

change as expressed in the Malay Zapin dance, and 2) the Arabic Zapin dance as a symbol, social prestige of people of Arab descent who are primordial and exclusive.

*Coastal Communities Bind Primordial Social Relations*

The Zapin Arab dance, which is only supported by the people of Arab descent in Al-Munawwar Village, can be seen as the new soul of the people of Palembang. Although this does not seem very strong if you only pay attention to the Zapin dance, if the Zapin dance is associated with the existence of people of Arab descent, then what animates the people of Palembang is the spirit of Islam so that the presence of Zapin Arab Dance is like a boat sailing back and forth on the Musi River. Or the strong support for the existence of the Ampera bridge.

In reality, Zapin Arab dance is complicated to blend in with the entire community of Palembang. Still, the presence of Zapin Malay dance can break the barriers of primordialism in the people of Arab descent. This is not the same as the pluralistic nature of the Palembang society. However, it is undeniable that the dynamics of the Palembang people are inspired by local Islamic spirituality, as seen in the Malay Zapin dance expression.

Even so, the existence of the Malay Zapin dance is seen as representing the colour of coastal culture. There is a syncretism between the spirit of the Inland community and the people who live in the commercial city. Even though the existence of the Zapin Arab dance is still exclusive to maintaining the identity of the community of Arab descent in Al-Munawwar Village, this is due to various factors, one of which is ethnic politics from the colonial era. Foreign people are placed in the second class of society, so they get a special place.

**Table 1.** Symbolic of Zapin Dance (Results of Analysis)

Type of Dance	Social Identity	Spiritual value	Symbol
Zapin Arab	Arab Society	Islamic	Coastal Society
Zapin Melayu	Malay Society	Traditional	Rural communities

Source: Author, 2022

Table number 1 shows a picture between Arabic and Malay Zapin, which represents the social identity of the people of Palembang. Overall, it shows spiritual values that are Islamic and traditional and is a symbol of the existence of coastal and inland communities in Palembang.

*Inland Malay Community Confirms Their locale*

Inland Communities by Strengthening Identity Local communities, or can be identified as rural communities, are our local communities. Those who have been genetically legitimized with a blend of Malay and Javanese. This is different from the Malay community in other places. They have a very high alus (smooth) taste. At least, it can be represented by the presence of the Badana dance. An expression of the existence of a gentle Palembang woman, hands with fingers flexed with 'stairs.' As Clifford Geertz expresses, this becomes a complementary dichotomy to define Javanese people, namely Alus and Kasar, as Elly lived in the creation of the Gending Sriwijaya dance, which is called the Tanggai dance. Its characteristics share how to enter the Buddhist temple of Borobudur, namely Pradaksina, circling to the right in a clockwise direction. However, the way around the temple is also equipped with Prasawiya, rotating to the left counterclockwise. It is felt by the Chinese people in the philosophy of Yin-Yang.

**Table 2.** Conflict Background (Results of Analysis)

Type of Dance	Cultural Background	Social Function	Interest
Zapin Arabic	Arabic	Islamic Religion Syiar	Community identity
Zapin Malay	Malay	Entertainment and Recreation	Ethnic identity

Table no. 2. The Palembang Malay community appears to have changed its social construct if one considers the existence of the Arabic and Malay Zapin dances. The people of Palembang who form the presence of the Zapin Arab dance are people of Arab descent, and the founders of the cultural background of the Zapin Melayu dance are the Palembang Malay people. Inland Malays are people who produce trading commodities, while people of Arab descent are those who become traders in the trading economy. They have a local cultural background in the past that functions as Islamic Religion Syiar for the Arabic Zapin dance, and the Malay Zapin dance serves as entertainment and recreation. This, of course, has a high level of social sensitivity.

Suppose you look at tables 1 and 2. It can be seen that there are conditions that have formed a pattern of resistance, namely the occurrence of conflicts of identity, existence, and interests in the Arab and Malay communities in Palembang. In social conflicts, of course, it has specific interests; the Zapin Arab dance seems to carry an interest in the existence of the community, namely showing the identity of the people of Arab descent, and the Zapin Malay dance for the sake of establishing the identity of the Malay community in Palembang. The conflict studied through the Zapin dance in Palembang is latency, which does not appear on the surface, and is not socially aware. Even though the Palembang community is multicultural, there is still solid symbolic resistance to the construction of the Palembang community.

The presence of conflict in coastal communities in Palembang is a symbolic form, namely resistance to the identity of coastal and inland communities. Because this conflict is formed from social unconsciousness, each builds its social strength from the existence of the Palembang community. This, of course, is not intended as a threat to the integrity of the people of Palembang but is a complementary balancing force. A social balance to maintain sociocultural stability. Zapin dance movements, both Zapin Arab and Zapin Malay, became a symbol in this conflict. Here, human interaction has occurred through the use of symbols. This can be related to the meaning and structure of each of its supporters. Each of its supporters gives sense by giving birth to Zapin Arab and Zapin Melayu as controllers of their lives. Therefore, in the interactions, each behaves based on the purpose the other person offers to him. The movements in Zapin Dance have meaning, and the structure of the supporting community is presented and used in interactions and conflicts. The purpose of the Zapin Dance is then interpreted based on the self-concept, which is influenced by the sociocultural structure of each supporting community.

## **4 Conclusion**

An interesting lesson in reading the Coastal community in Palembang because it cannot be read unilaterally. The coastal communities in Palembang should be read as one unit like the Chinese Yin-Yang philosophy. Even so, socio-culturally reading the coastal communities through the Zapin dance will find the social conditions of the people of Palembang. A phenomenon of Arab descent society that is exclusive but provides reinforcement from the Islamic spiritual aspect for the people of Palembang. Meanwhile, rural communities also show

appreciation as an ethnic community with a social identity, while Islam can be found in the Zapin Arab dance as a spiritual identity.

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