

# **ZAPIN AS RITUALIZED *DHIKR*: SILENT REMEMBRANCE OF GOD THROUGH MUSIC AND DANCE**

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Almost all of the 240 million Muslims in Southeast Asia belong to the Sunni sect following the Shafii school of Muslim jurisprudence. They have practised Islam from the teachings of Muslim traders and preachers since the 12th century, which was further developed by Sufi mystics from the 13th century laying prominence on Islam's humanistic orientation, with emphasis on love and compassion. Accounting for about 42 percent of the total Southeast Asian population and 25 percent of the total world Muslim population (estimated at 1.6 billion), the three countries (Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei) with Muslim-majority populations, and minority Muslims in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam; have tolerated the meeting between monotheistic Islam, pantheistic tradition of Islamic mysticism and pre-Islamic traditions into a syncretized forbearance of Southeast Asian Islam (Yusof 2015). Islam not only spread through the expansion of trade among West Asia, India and Southeast Asia, but it also spread through Sufi missionaries who played a significant role in affirming the teaching is spreading the faith through the practices of the *tariqah*. Islam had a firm footing in maritime Southeast Asia by the time the Portuguese arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## ***Tariqah* in Southeast Asia**

Sufism in Southeast Asia have produced rich literature from Sufi orders by well-known Sufi literary figures from such as Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, Muhammad ibn Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, Hamzah Fansuri, Syams ad-Din as-Sumatrani, Nur ad-Din ar-Raniri, Syaikh Yusuf al-Khalwati, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim as-Samman al-Madani, and 'Abd as-Samad al-Palimbani (Rahim, 1995: 5-7). Sufi orders or *tariqah* are used for both the social organisation and the special devotional exercises that are the basis of the order's ritual and structure (Voll, 1995: 109). *Tariqah* or Sufi orders in

Southeast Asia gained ground through the *tariqah* or Tariqat Qadirriyyah, Syattariah, Kalwatiyyah Sammaniyyah and Kalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah.

Almost all *tariqah* orders are named after its founder based on the chain or lineage of sheikhs known as the *silsilah* (Arabic: سلسلة). Except for the Naqshabandi order that goes back to the first Caliph Abu Bakr and the Prophet Muhammad, other *silsilah* leads back to the Prophet Muhammad through Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. The order is referred to the founder's name. For example, the *tariqah* and its *silsilah* of the "Rifai order" or "Rifaiyyah" is named after Sheikh Ahmad ar-Rafai while the *silsilah* of the "Qādirī order" is named after Sheikh `Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī and the *tariqah* is referred to as the "Qādiriyah".

Sufism is affirmed through the teaching of *tariqah* or way of the *sharia't*. The word *sharia't* literally means "the road to watering place" implying true knowledge. In the broadest sense, Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. In general, Sufis have looked upon themselves as Muslims who take seriously God's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self. As such, they tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of soul over social interaction (Chittick, 1995: 102). *Tariqah* (Arabic: طريقة Ṭarīqah; pl. طرق; *ṭuruq*, or Turkish: *tarikāt*) in Sufism is conceptually related to the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*" that is sought by the aspirants (*murīdīn*: singular *murīd*) of *tariqah* through the "guide" or *murshid*. A group of *murīdīn* of a *tariqah* desires the knowledge of knowing God and loving God or *faqīr* (Arabic: فقير), which they would refer to as "needing or desiring God's knowledge," or *al-Faqīr ilā l-Lāh* (Arabic: الفقير إلى الله). Once a *murid* enters the *tariqah*, he gets his daily recitations, or '*awrād*, which is authorised by his *murshid*. The '*awrād* or recitation is usually recited before or after prayers (pre-dawn, afternoon and evening prayers) and may consist of reciting a certain formula for tens, hundreds or a thousand times.

Sufi orders or *tariqah* engage in ritualized *dhikr* (Arabic: ذكر, plural اذكار *adhakār*, which means remembrance, pronouncement or invocation of the names of God). In Southeast Asia, *dhikr* is considered an important extension to the recitation of *doa* (ordinary supplication to ask for divine blessing in general). *Dhikr*, the devotional acts in Islam in which short phrases or prayers are repeatedly recited silently within the heart or aloud, takes the form of methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and his messenger, Muhammad) or the names of God or God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) or some formula such as "*Allah hayy*" (God is the Eternal one) with prescribed gestures, has become one of the

fundamental rituals in *tariqah* or *tariqat*. A gathering to perform the Dhikr ritual usually takes place in private homes or closed public spaces. Such gatherings could be convened with the presence of a culturally structured movement system and musical accompaniment (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 35).

The devotional act of repeating the names of God or of God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) in *dhikr* or supplications or formulas are taken from hadith texts and verses of the Qur'an is usually done individually. But in some Sufi orders *dhikr* is instituted as a ceremonial activity, which may be ritually determined by the sheikh for his *murids*. Followers of Sufism engage in ritualized *dhikr* by each order or lineage (*silsilah*), which may include recitation, singing, instrumental music, dance, and ecstasy.

However, Sufi practices that are embedded in the performing arts of Southeast Asia are rarely known outside its circle of practitioners and has remained as an esoteric knowledge of the beholder. To an outsider, Sufi music or dance performances continue to be seen as conventional performances of folk traditions, performed for celebratory occasions or staged as public spectacle rather than a religious one. *Dhikr* as a solemn form of supplication plays an important role in negotiating temporality in the *zapin* dance in maritime Southeast Asia, connecting the Malay world and the world of the Southern Arabian Peninsula.

### ***Zapin as ritualized Dhikr***

Ritualized *dhikr* in the form of a corporeal act of remembrance, pronouncement or invocation of the names of God could be observed exclusively in the *zapin*, which is known by various other names such as *jipin*, *jepin*, *japin*, *zafin* and *dana* in Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei and Singapore. Indigenous Southeast Asians created *zapin* as a hybrid form through syncretic borrowing and adapting of the Arabic *zaffin* from Hadramaut in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Both *zapin* and *zaffin* are dominated by men, with an exception of the Malay *zapin* which allows women's participation since the 1970s (Mohd Anis Md Nor 2011: 42-43).

Malay *zapin* has extrinsic and intrinsic qualities, the former celebrates events associated with weddings, circumcisions, and social events of religious significance such as Maulidur Rasul (Prophet's birthday), and the latter is associated with ritualized *dhikr*. It had taken roots amongst the Malay-Islamic communities in the Straits of Malacca to become one of the most widely spread ritualized *dhikr* performed overtly or covertly in insular Southeast Asia.

Extrinsic relationships are driven by contextual cues and prior knowledge of the performance traditions whilst intrinsic relationships are derived from structures and elements of performance (Mason, 2012: 18), in this context, the invocation *dhikr* is embedded in music and movement of *zapin*. Although they are holistically interrelated, ritualized *dhikr* is intrinsically contingent on the performers' ability to gaze the *dhikr* gestural-rhythm mimetic qualities while dancing the *zapin* relies on the extrinsic correlation of melodic-harmonic-rhythmic musical sounds in their step-motifs in time and space.

Dancing/musicking and *dikhr* mutually coalesced cadences and segmentations shaped the interdependent relationship of music and body movements, and evoked a sense of ritualized *dhikr* through musicking and performing culturally structured movement system. The zenith of interactive dancing/musicking and silent remembrance or invocation of the name of God in ritualized *dhikr* is reached through artistic choices and self-reflexive approaches to creating music and dance as holistic *dhikr* rather than of separate entities. Whilst body movements occupy a singular visual position in *zapin* performance, ritualized *dhikr* manipulate movements and sound in a singular cohesive entity that are intrinsically and extrinsically satisfying to the *zapin* beholders. The overlapping combination of music-movement and ritualized *dhikr* are mutually negotiated through the gazes of the musicians and dancers, sensing kinesthetic pulses within the temporal units of the cyclical pattern of sound within the metric iso-periodic *zapin* tune/music.

*Dhikr* recitation has been observed in the Arabic *zaffin* and Malay *zapin* by practitioners or *murīdīn* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or otherwise known as the Ba'Alawi in the former, and the *tariqah* *Naqshabandiyah*, in the latter. The members of Ba'Alawi *tariqah* are mainly Sayyid or Syed (سيد) whose ancestors hail from the Valley of Hadhramaut, are held in high esteem as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (Othman, 1998: Azra, 2004), while members of the *tariqah* *Naqshabandiyah* are exclusively Malay and Indonesian.

Although the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah or Ba'Alawi remains exclusively within the descendants of Sayyid or Syed (سيد) from Hadhramaut in Southeast Asia, similar practices could be observed in the practices of the Malay *zapin*, introverted as silent *dhikr* by the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* *Naqshabandiyah*. The inclusion of a structured movement system and music as a means of convening silent *dhikr* amongst *Naqshabandis* in Southeast Asia is exclusive to practitioners of *zapin*. However, not all *zapin* performers are *dhikr* practitioners, and *zapin* does not implicitly signify *dhikr*. Ritualized *dhikr* in *zapin* is exclusive to the *murīdīn* of *Naqshabandiyah* or *tariqah* *Khalidiyyah-Naqshabandiyah*.

The corpus of ritualized *dhikr* in *zapin* is in the affirmation of *tawhid*, the essence of Islam that affirms Allah (SWT) to be the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master. The notion of *tawhid* is derived from “one,” “unique” (*wahid*) that is translated as in the unity of God, oneness, peerlessness, and utter transcendence of God. Islam declares the transcendence of God to be part and parcel of Islamic philosophy, of life and of the believers’ way of asserting that God has created all humans capable of knowing Him in His transcendence (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2003).

### ***Zapin as Corporeal Dhikr***

*Zapin* music and dance are conventionally structured into three parts. The first part is marked by a *taksim*, an improvised solo played by a single ‘*ud* or locally known as the *gambus* (lute). The *gambus* is derived from the Middle Eastern ‘*ud*, a pear-shaped chordophone with rounded wooden back and short fretless neck. It has five to eight strings in double courses and a single string that are plucked with fingers. The second part consist of a melodic section with *kopak*, a loud rhythmic *marwas* drumming patterns in interlocking style, while the final section is known as the *wainab* or *tahtim*, which forms the coda for a piece to end that utilizes an extension of the main melodic phrase and the loud *kopak* drumming pattern (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2004: 128-130). The divisional units or sections in the *zapin* music have become generic in areas along the Straits of Malacca.

The musical sections of *zapin* music correspond with the sections of the dance performance. All *zapin* performers are required to enter the dance area in a single file or in double rows and present a salutation to the musical prelude or *Taksim*, played by a single ‘*ud* or *gambus* (lute) player. This is to be followed by the linear formation of *zapin* performers who dance facing one another while repeating dance motifs while tracing a recurring forward and backwards floor plan, interrupted by a series of skips and squatting positions, which is also known as the *kopak*. At the end of each performance, the dancers perform jumping and squatting dance motifs to the accompaniment of relatively faster drumbeats in the form of the *wainab* (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 37).

Dancing the *zapin* or playing *zapin* music could become corporeal *dikhr* only if the practitioner wishes to embody the body movements or musical pulses as pulses of the silent *dhikr* utterance. The litanies of *dhikr* are not heard beyond introvert individual recitations. It is performed as a silent *dhikr* while the *zapin* songs or *qasidah* are sung by one of two singers. The dancers’ 4-beat

pattern from the pulses of their *dhikr* litanies frames the basic dance unit, which is accompanied by the musical sounds of the instruments such as the *marwas* hand drums and the *dok* barrel drum. A repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* hand drums punctuated by a *dok* drum over a 16-beat unit frames the dance motifs.

The compound structure of *zapin* drumming patterns within a 16-beat metric iso-periodic unit and the overarching rendition of *zapin* songs or *qasidah* consisting of repeated quatrains of passionate verses in praise of Prophet Muhammad and the attributes of God either literally or metaphorically provides the spatial and sonic space for *dhikr*. Although dance movements only begin on the second drum beat, which is of low timbre as it initiates the *kinemic* pulse, *dhikr* is first uttered during the first high timbre beat of the *marwas* drums. The first *shahadah*, *Lā ilaha illal-Lāh, Muhammadun rasūlula-Lāh* ("There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God") commences on the high timber beat while the dance begins on the low timbre beat, which forms the second drum beat. The entire *zhikr* would be completed at the end of the 8-beat phrase of a repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* drums. By then, the *dhikr*-dancer completes his dance motif as he completes the first round of his *shahadah*. The *dhikr* would be repeated over the 8-beat phrase into the second round of *shahadah* recitation as the dancers complete his dance or *choreme* over 16-beats unit.

Within these chronological grammatical choreographic units, the *zapin* dancers interact with drummers and other *zapin* musicians with mnemonic vocalisations while sustaining the silent *dhikr* over improvised dance motifs. To practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, most of the improvisations that deal with syncopated dance movements within an iso-periodic unit of *zapin* music provide both spatial and sonic space for the inward contemplation of God's oneness and peerlessness, the spiritual essence of *Tawhid*. To non-practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, the extrinsic movement improvisations within the iso-periodic unit of *zapin* music with mnemonic vocalisations are deliberately made to impress or challenge new dancers or to encourage others to join in the dance or as signals to the musicians to end their performance. *Zapin* ends with a loud rhythmic *kopak* played by interlocking drumming patterns of the *marwas* hand drums. In this final section known as the *wainab* or *tahtim*, the intrinsic qualities of *zapin* reached its climax. The word 'wainab' is derived from the Arabic word *wainaq* (وعناق), which means embraced or hug (وعناق). The word *wainaq* (وعناق) appears to signify the climatic yearning of wanting to be embraced by God or embracing God. *Zapin* reinforces the pinnacle state of the temporality of the silent *dhikr*. It is a

knowledge of the esoteric, known and understood by those whose *tariqah* commands the *murīdīn* to embrace God's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self, best described as a Sufistic path.

### **Tolerance: Corporeal Dhikr**

Corporeal *dhikr* within *zapin* embodies intrinsic mental or verbal repetition of one of the divine names of God over the extrinsic regular 4-beat counts of the drumming pattern. The ritualized *dhikr* executed through repetitive steps of *zapin* dance motifs affirms the way of the *sharia't*, implying knowledge and teaching of the *tariqah*. The *murīdīn* of *tariqah* Naqshabandiyah in Southeast Asia, negotiates temporality in *zapin* through *dhikr*'s utterance of God's name and/or methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his messenger, Muhammad) through ritualized *dhikr*, which stresses inwardness of contemplating God's existence and in his absolute transcendence, hence affirming the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*" fundamental to mystical Islam.

*Zapin* as ritualized *dhikr* is generally tolerated by the Muslim ummah (nation or community) in Southeast Asia because *zapin* is foremost a secular structured movement system. *Zapin* becomes mystical when *dhikr* is ritually performed with the extrinsic and intrinsic qualities of corporeal *dhikr* by the *murīdīn* of *tariqah* Naqshabandiyah, either covertly within the close circle of *murīdīn* or overtly amongst *dhikr* practitioners. However, in recent time ritualized *dhikr* in *zapin* is being contested by the resurgence of the Salafiyah influence by nascent Wahhabis in Southeast Asia. The Salafi or Salafist movement is an ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam that references the doctrine known as Salafism with a fundamentalist approach to Islam often described as being synonymous with Wahhabism. Wahhabism is a religious movement of Sunni Islam, orthodox and puritanical, from the teachings of eighteenth-century preacher and scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in Saudi Arabia. The Salafists abhorred ritualized *dhikr* as being religious innovation, or *bida* (heretical doctrine or heresy).

The emergence of Salafists doctrine through the processes of "cultural-Arabization" by Southeast Asian Wahabi adherents within the last two decades in Southeast Asian have greatly influenced Southeast Asian Muslims to condemn common practices such as ritualized *dhikr* as polytheism or *shirk*, reduced the visibility of ritualized *dhikr* in *zapin* amongst the Southeast Asian Muslims. It has not only impacted the overt display of ritualized *dhikr* in *zapin* but in all forms of corporeal practices. However, in recent time, fear for the

demise of indigenous Islamic cultural practices through the unabridged processes of cultural-Arabization have encouraged Muslim politicians and Southeast Asian *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars) to counter such advances through “political” and “spiritual” voices. These voices amongst others affirmatively supported *dhikr* within a structured movement system, such as *zapin*, as tolerable (*mubah*) in Islam.

During the opening of the National Conference of Ulema Board of Nahdlatul Ulama at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta in Jun 2015, President Joko Widodo or Jokowi of Indonesia introduced the term "Islam Nusantara" as a retort to the Arabization and Neo Talibanisation of Indonesian Muslims. In an interview with the BBC Indonesia after the event, Jokowi affirmed that "Islam Nusantara is a friendly Islam, not radical, inclusive and tolerant." The Indonesian President emphasised that "Islam in the Indonesian archipelago was spread over the ages by a cultural approach that is not rigid and hard, and thus Indonesian Muslims should not become Arabized but to keep to the indigenous practices of Islam" (Amin Iskandar 2015).

Haron Din, an *ulama* and the spiritual leader of the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party, riposted a verse from the Holy Quran to refute the condemnations of ritualized corporeal *zhikr* amongst *tariqa* orders by Southeast Asia Salafists. The verse from Sura Al-Imran in the third chapter of the Qur'an affirms the tolerance of corporeal *dhikr*.

*"Who remember Allah [Dhikr] while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]; then protect us from the punishment of the Fire."*(Surah Ali Imran verse 191)

The Ulama argues that corporeal *dhikr* is not haram (forbidden) in Islam as long as men and women do it separately and when the body movements and gestures are innately connected to remember and proclaim the *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and his messenger, Muhammad), which stresses an inwardness of contemplating God's existence and his absolute transcendence.

The affirmation to sustain the roots and traditions of Southeast Asian Islam (Islam Nusantara) by President Jokowi of Indonesia and barrages of counter statements by Muslim legal scholars to admonish Salafists doctrine in Malaysia and Indonesia have enabled *zapin* to continue to draw practitioners towards ritualized *dhikr* where music and dance negotiate religious and



cultural practices. *Zapin* as ritualized *dhikr* has stood against these biases to remain significant to indigenous Southeast Asian Muslims contesting a recent import of ultra-conservative Wahhabism from the Middle East. Southeast Asian ulama (Muslim legal scholars) affirmatively supported *dhikr* (recitation of the divine names or litanies) within a structured movement system as tolerable (*mubah*) in Islam. This resonates well with existing practices observed in the *zapin* dance and music in the coastal areas of maritime Southeast Asia performed by followers of *tariqah*. Corporeal *dhikr* symbolises the broad way in which the performer-practitioners find a way to travel and seek God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Taksim is derived from the Arabic word “taqsim,” which means “division” or “distribution” and refers to a special improvisational musical form that is guided by the Makam system, a system of melody types, which provides a set of rules for composition.

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