

AN EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUAL CHARACTERS IN SABA RITUALS DANCE PERFORMANCE: A MANIFESTATION OF COSMIC SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT: *The embodiment of spiritual characters (supernatural characters) in saba ritual dance performance is the main focus of this study. Through the qualitative method with the ethnography approach, this work seeks to explain the relationship between behaviour and culture. An analysis was done through the cosmology theory application which observes that the natural phenomenon covers real and supernatural events also the position of the people in it. The relationship between man and nature creates creativity in works of art. The work created is a mark of the existence of the cosmological relationship of the artist and his religious belief. This is related to the four cosmic elements namely soil, water, fire, and wind. The works of art are also believed to have their soul. The application of cosmology theory integrates the existence of the physical and the metaphysic cosmic dimensions that underlie the views of the practitioners in regarding the saba ritual dance as a ritual for healing. The dancers will experience a trance as an indication of an embodiment of supernatural characters in the performance through the players' bodies. An offering is also served as the effort to make present the supernatural characters in the performance. Through this way, the players' personalities will be separated and players are capable of creating the supernatural characters and manifesting the cosmic symbol in the effort to conduct the healing process.*

Keywords: *saba, ritual, cosmic symbols, embodiment, healing*

1.INTRODUCTION

Saba is a form of dance originating from ritualistic events and it is connected to some religious procedures practiced by Malays since the era of animism. It is a set of symbolic behaviors such as forms of worship, sacrifice and prohibitions. Ritual is the human effort to release his desire to connect with the supernatural, appropriate with the human instinct to possess religious emotions. Ritual performance is a process derived from the human desire to connect with the metaphysical world following their tendency to have some religious sentiment. Thus, ritual performance is something yielded from human action and desire to connect with the supernatural for certain purposes such as asking for good things, prosperity and wellbeing of the practitioners' community [3].

The ritual system also relates to the aspects of existence and the cosmos of the lives of mankind. This refers to the field of cosmology involving the discussion about the physical and metaphysical phenomena, not to mention the position of humans within it. The relationship between humans and nature creates human creativity and the capacity to produce works of art. This is related to the four cosmic elements, soil, water, fire and wind. The work produced explains the artist's belief towards their own religious cosmologic belief. Referring to the theory, the work produced is believed to have its soul [3]. Stemming from the belief that human existence in the cosmic space is mutually connected between the physical and the metaphysical, humans also realize that their existence is determined by the existence of the supernatural other than humans. Such an existence is also believed to give both positive and negative impacts on the human cause. The negative effect is often experienced by humans in the form of disturbance, or mental or physical disease. In this vein, humans perform ritualistic performances as a form of an effort to cure diseases experienced other than forbidding the negative impact from continuing to disturb their lives. Through the rituals, humans also believe that positive aura can be made present to ensure that they are sustainable.

From there, the belief towards religion and the mystical phenomenon is the metaphysical aspect that can drive humans towards achieving a transcendent truth. This is because both aspects have been proven to be able to

motivate and inspire humans who have the effort to understand and explain the physical world. Following the belief on religion and mystical phenomenon, *saba* ritual dance has become possible. *Saba* practitioners believe that the physical world that they inhabit is also influenced by the metaphysical world. It is the world where the supernatural life which mythically is believed to be the soul of their ancestors. From this belief, the offering is also served in *saba* ritual dance. The purpose is to respect and to ask for permission from the supernatural to bless their actions in the effort to cure various kinds of diseases that they suffer from. In this aspect, the healing in *saba* ritual dance is categorized as '*faith healing*', referring to the ritualistic practice that relates to religious beliefs. Healing takes place due to the belief that the supernatural power involved in the ritual implementation acts as an intervention in the healing process.

Thus, the effort to explore into the healing ritual manifested symbolically through the *saba* ritual dance carried out in Kampung Teluk Belanja located in the district of Jengai, Hulu Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia. At the study location, the researcher has the opportunity to watch the *saba* ritual dance led by Che Wan Norsaidi binti Che Wan Abdul Rahman or better known as Mak Zah. She is an *ibu pedian* who plays the instrument *anak umban* and she is also the head of the shaman during the performance.

In terms of the origin, the *saba* ritual dance performance is created in conjunction with the name of a tree named *saba* and it is believed to have grown in the fantasy world and become the playground for the goddesses. Due to this, during the *saba* ritual dance, the goddesses are always urged to bless the performance and help in the healing process. Thus, as the effort to bring the goddesses down to earth, their place has to be prepared, in the form of a garden as they would have it in the fantasy world. The *saba* tree in that world is the goddesses' favourite tree. Thus, it must be created in the garden of the Earth. If the tree is not prepared for them, it is believed that the gods and goddesses will not come down to earth to bless the performance or help in the healing process. It is because of this that *saba* tree becomes the main offering that they should serve in the *saba* ritual dance performance because it is a symbol of a garden in the fantasy world. *Chenayang* is the person responsible in

preparing the *saba* tree-he is very skillful at preparing offerings for the ritual dance. The *saba* tree is made of coconut blossoms and fronds. Two types of *saba* tree are tied together for the performance and this is known as *saba genit* and *saba junjung* decorated with the motif *awan larat*.

2. PEDUAN (BAPAK PEDUAN / IBU PEDUAN)

Saba ritual dance is believed to have started in Terengganu since the era of change from Hinduism-Buddhism-Islam in the Archipelago around the 13th century. According to the narrative, around 150 years ago, *saba* ritual dance was introduced by a woman shaman named Tok Bomoh Comot. She had taught the ritual dance to Tengku Yem who then introduced and expanded it to the district of Hulu Dungun, which is in Kampung Kuala Jengai. The effort to spread *saba* ritual dance was continued by Che Wan Muda Dewa and Che Wan Deraman Cabang. In 1956, the responsibility to continue the legacy of *saba* ritual dance was shouldered by Che Wan Abdul Rahman, the father of Che Wan Norsaidi (Mak Zah). To this day, Mak Zah is the only inheritor of the *saba* ritual dance that still lives on-she lives in Kampung Kuala Cengai, Terengganu [1].

She began to embark upon the *saba* ritual dance in 1970 where she began as a dancer. Since young, Mak Zah was exposed to *saba* ritual dance and she often followed her father who was a *peduan* (*Bapak peduan* is a common name for a male shaman, whereas *ibu peduan* is for the female shaman) making performance whether to cure patients or for entertainment performances only. In the performance, *Peduan* acts as the head of the shaman who plays the instrument *anak umbang* while chanting to cure diseases. *Peduan* will communicate with the second shaman possessed from the embodiment of *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* during the performance of *saba* ritual dance for healing while ushered by goddesses onto the earth. *Peduan* also acts to control the goddesses that alternately possess the second shaman to communicate with *peduan*. Apart from that, *peduan* also plays the role in safeguarding and controlling the communication between the creatures of the physical world and the metaphysical creatures so that the relationship between both is not cut off to ensure the ritual sustainability.

Earlier on, Mak Zah was only interested to become a dancer and she did not have any interest to play *anak umbang* (*Peduan*). Since young, she neither touched nor played that musical instrument. However, Mak Zah began to change interest after her father died, due to two factors, the first is that there are no inheritors who can play the instrument *anak umbang*. Secondly, it is the genetic factor that makes Mak Zah so skilled playing *anak umbang* by way of inheritance. Che Wan Norsaidi binti Che Wan Abdul Rahman (Mak Zah) [1] narrated that one day, she was asked by the villagers to perform the *saba* ritual dance to cure diseases. Mak Zah refused because she never learned or even taught by her late father on how to become a *peduan* (head of the shaman) where it requires the skills to control or play the instrument *anak umbang*, which is a specific characteristic of becoming an *ibu peduan* to complete the healing process. Surrendering to Mak Zah's decision, since then, the villagers had never asked her to perform to heal patients.

However, not long after that, something strange had happened to Mak Zah, which was when she heard

something when she was busy doing house chores, which sounded like someone was playing the musical instrument *anak umbang*. As she was very busy that day, Mak Zah did not pay too much attention to what she heard and the sound disappeared. On another occasion, as she was relaxing, Mak Zah suddenly felt the urge to play *anak umbang* so she took it and plucked the strings softly. Strangely enough, the strumming of *anak umbang* had produced a very pleasant sound. Carried away with the phenomenon, finally, all of a sudden Mak Zah became capable of mastering the instrument *anak umbang* and at the time, Mak Zah was 13 years old. Starting from that incident, Mak Zah no longer refused if there was a request from the villagers for her to play the *saba* ritual dance performance, be it for healing or entertainment. Her role in *saba* ritual dance had also changed from a dancer to the head of shaman who plays the instrument *anak umbang* also known as *ibu peduan* (head of the shaman).

3. EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUAL CHARACTERS

Generally speaking, embodiment means someone or something that represents a quality or an idea. The embodied or the embodiment refers to psychology which brings two meanings. The first is known as 'Embodied Cognition' (referring to the embodiment of the mind), which is a position in cognitive science and the philosophy of the mind that stresses the role played by the body in forming the mind. The second is the 'Embodied Imagination', which is a form of creative therapy that connects with the dream and the memory. Meanwhile, in theatre rehearsals, the physical process of embodiment concentrates on the specific part of the actors' *psychophysical* whose training is based on embodying the mind thesis which seeks to unite the segregation of the body and the mind [2].

The role of "the actor" or "player" in the ritual performance often tries to "weep out" their personality. For example, the player would not normally be required to play the character of a god, or a mythical character, but in turn, accepting the characters in the effort to make them appear through the body. In the *saba* ritual dance performance, the embodiment of creatures or spiritual characters can be done by wearing a fixed costume, a mask, or even makeup. Through these, the players' personalities will be separated and players will be able to embody the spiritual characters from generation to generation using the same way. The players involved in embodying the spiritual characters in the *saba* ritual dance would be the head of the shaman, which is the *ibu peduan* (aging woman) and the second shaman (a man) [4,5].

The role of the second shaman is as a mediator that embodies the supernatural character known as *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* to communicate with *ibu peduan* (head of the shaman) to identify the medicine that can heal patients. As soon as *ibu peduan* plays *anak umbang*, immediately the second shaman will be possessed or embodied by the supernatural entities which are the gods and goddesses. The communication between both the shaman and *ibu peduan* uses the language that only two of them understand which is the language of the supernatural that has possessed their bodies. The role of *ibu peduan* is to translate their conversations to the public, using the generally understood language.

4. THE CALLING OF SPIRITUAL CHARACTER'S EMBODIMENT

The performance began with the ritual *buka balai* (open hall) done in the patient's home. *Balai* is the place where the medicating process takes place. The condition is that the *balai* must be a closed space and does not reach the ground, like the living room or the bedroom. The ritual *buka balai* is led by *ibu peduan* beginning with the ritual of closing four spaces or corners to prevent the disturbance of the evil supernatural entities when the healing process takes place. The four corners represent the cosmic symbol of land, water, fire and wind. After the ritual *buka balai* had ended, musicians will arrange the instruments on their positions covering instruments like the drum or *gong*, *gendang ibu* and *gendang anak* on the floor. After all the musical instruments are arranged, musicians will take their place together with the *ibu peduan* while bringing the instrument *anak umbang*. After taking their place, *ibu peduan* will first smother the musical instrument with incense. After burning the incense, *ibu peduan* will play the song *bertabik* which is also the opening song for *buka balai*. After the song is played, the dancers will enter the performance stage accompanied by a song *burung baniung* played by *ibu peduan*.

The whole performance takes place through a rhythmic communication in the form of a chant between *ibu peduan* and the second shaman possessed by *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan*. *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* is the second god that interacts with the *ibu peduan* through the body of the second shaman as the medium. *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* embodied by the second shaman also communicates with the *saba* tree to determine the best cure for the patient. *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* also represents the gods and goddesses who use the body of the second shaman, in turn, to make themselves present and to communicate with the *ibu peduan* to explain the cause of the disease, type of disease and the medicine that can cure diseases. The interaction between the *ibu peduan* and the second shaman possessed by *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* is the chant read in the form of rhythmical dialogues and body language with the music *anak umbang* playing throughout the process of healing. If the song and the music stop mid-performance, the healing process is rendered failed. Thus, the healing process has to be repeated from the start by following the conditions determined by the supernatural entities. Throughout the ritual, *ibu peduan* also plays a part in controlling the second shaman possessed by the god *Awang Muda Diawan*. Meanwhile, the patient receiving treatment will sit on the floor.

After the ritual, *ibu peduan* will bathe the patient using a mixture of *batang chalung* and *air pemulih*. *Mayang pinang* will be peeled by *ibu peduan* to identify the type of disease suffered from. After it is identified, *ibu peduan* will sprinkle rice on the floor. The sprinkled rice will then be chosen and collected by *ibu peduan* to feed the patient where it serves as medicine, based on the suggestions of the supernatural entities. At the end of the healing process, the second shaman embodied by *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* will lead the ritual called *tutup balai* by bringing down the *saba* tree also cleaning the space using the offering *timba tasik*. The offering *lancang pilang* will be filled by the second shaman with the food *komor berdarah* (areca nut), *buah jitung* (areca seed), *sekaya mak jung* (*nipah*

cigarettes), *genut roti* (flour bread), *bunga kembang*, *seri lica* (cooking oil) dan *kalbuq* (flower liquid). When all the offerings are collected, the second shaman will put float the *lancang pilang*, *saba* tree and *timba tasik* along the river during the day, or after Subh.

5. THE MANIFESTATION OF THE COSMIC SYMBOL THROUGH THE EMBODIMENT OF SUPERNATURAL CHARACTERS

The lifestyle of the *saba* ritual dance practitioners is in the forests and the rivers – they are the sources of their lives. Thus, this also influences the system of belief and cosmology based on animism as they lead their lives. Based on animism, the community of practitioners of the *saba* ritual dance believes that there is a guardian from among the supernatural entities or the gods that monitor every corner of this universe led by *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* living in the fantasy world. All these gods are believed to be able to give prosperity, peace, sustenance and all the good things in the world. Nonetheless, these entities can bring the burden in the form of hardship or diseases if they are not respected. Cosmologically, the supernatural characters represent four cosmic symbols, namely soil, fire, water and wind to ensure that there is a balance of existence. Referring to the *saba* ritual dance, the supernatural creature *Dewa Awang Muda Diawan* is the guardian of the fantasy world representing the symbol of the wind, which is hot and humid. The offering *Anak hujan* (*Timba tasik*) represents the symbol of water which is characteristically cold and humid. The supernatural character of *Dewa Anak Tedung* is fierce, hot and dry representing the symbol of fire whereas the character named *Awang Mihad Gembala* represents the symbol of the soil which is cold and dry. Thus, the *saba* ritual dance practitioners use the strength of the universe to manifest the relationship between humans and the cosmic world. The main power in the relationship is based on the belief of the practitioners towards the gods that are believed to take care of the balance among the four cosmic elements. Therefore, the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical world has to be safeguarded because the entities in both worlds need each other, especially humans who normally ask for help from the supernatural force as they live their lives.

Stemming from the supernatural belief, the *saba* ritual dance is performed as a form of communication between humans and the gods for healing. In the traditional belief, the diseases experienced by humans are caused by the imbalance of the cosmic elements in the human body. Therefore, through the healing from the *saba* ritual dance, *ibu peduan* and the second shaman will call upon the supernatural creatures that represent the said cosmic symbols. In this process, both the internal and the external cosmos will fight against the evil elements that disturb the human body. The effort made by the practitioners in the healing process aims at firstly, to see the diseases that need to be warded off, secondly to know the root cause of the diseases. The third aim is to identify the type of the supernatural entities that disturb patients and the fourth one is to suggest the medication that can cure the diseases.

Referring to the offerings used in the performance, the *saba* tree is a symbol representing four cosmic elements, namely soil, water, fire and wind. This is because the *saba* tree is the place where the gods and goddesses gather by bringing

both negative and positive elements also communicate with *ibu peduan* through the second shaman to heal the patients. Thus, the *saba* tree is the minor cosmos created by creatures in the physical world to be inhabited by the supernatural creatures from the metaphysical world. The offerings of the *saba* tree is completed with the offering named *timba tasik* and *lancang pilang* where both represent the symbol of soil and land. The offering *kapal ayah* was shaped like a ship containing various delicacies and which represents the symbol of the wind. At the end of the ritual called *tutup balai*, all the offerings including the *saba* tree will be cleaned using food called *timba tasik*. The offerings cleaned will be put in the offering named *kapal ayah* to be kept afloat in the river or the sea with all the diseases and the negative element suffered by patients.

Thus, about the animism belief that forms the *saba* ritual dance that nature, human and performance are an organic affiliation that owns cosmos spirit and unites every single thing. In this relationship, the transformation of the cosmic spirit shifts from the physical and metaphysical worlds into the human body (*ibu peduan*, second shaman and the patient) so much so that the performance done can cure the diseases. Through the *saba* ritual dance, the cosmos of nature and the performance unites until it is capable of creating aesthetic beauty. This also refers to the internal and external concepts of human existence as a cosmos. The external body of humans is the external cosmos whereas the aspect of the human soul is the internal cosmos. However, what is important for humans of religion would lie in the internal wellbeing that very much depends on the wellbeing of the internal cosmos. This also influences the external cosmos of humans that attaches itself to a religious belief whereby in the context of practitioners, the *saba* ritual dance is the belief of animism.

6. CONCLUSION

In terms of performance, *saba* ritual dance is a combination of dance movements, singing, music, and acting. Traditionally, *saba* ritual dance is the performance practice for healing, based on animism and the belief towards the

existence of the supernatural in the metaphysical world. Individuals who can communicate with the supernatural are regarded as special because they can cure diseases caused by their disturbances. Their embodiment plays an important role in *saba* ritual dance because it is the communicative code practiced by players, especially those played by *ibu peduan*, the second shaman and the mass in identifying the idea behind certain events. Through the embodiment of the supernatural characters, the practitioners of *saba* ritual dance can get to know their world and justify their social lives, physically or spiritually. They also know about the course of nature and the concept of existence. They also learn about the meaning of power, sustenance, time and space, good and bad, good practices, heaven, hell, life, and death. Indeed, the embodiment of spiritual characters through the players' bodies is a very meaningful and mystical symbolic expression.

7. REFERENCES

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