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Research Paper

Preserving the Dampeng Dance Tradition in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City, Aceh

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Abstract

The Dampeng dance of the Singkil people is performed at weddings, circumcisions and guest receptions, but it is performed less often than in the past. An earlier study in Rundeng District described preservation efforts in one village from the viewpoint of village officials; the views of young people and the reasons for declining interest were not examined. This study describes why interest in the Dampeng dance has declined, which cultural values residents attach to it, and which measures and obstacles they identify for its preservation in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City, Aceh. A qualitative descriptive design was used, with interviews of five informants (the mukim, a young man, a woman resident and two community figures), observation and documentation. Informants attributed the decline to outside cultures and modern entertainment, performances regarded as less appealing than before, and the absence of places to learn. The values named were togetherness, mutual cooperation, responsibility, politeness, respect for guests and local identity. Proposed measures were a dance studio led by senior dancers for children, open performances at public events, village-level socialisation and school activities. Obstacles were low interest among youth, declining understanding of customary meaning and limited government support. The measures remain proposals.

Keywords: Dampeng dance; Singkil people; Cultural preservation; Traditional dance; Youth; Aceh.

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1. Introduction

Traditional performing arts in Indonesia lose practitioners when young people turn to globally circulated entertainment. Globalisation has been reported to reduce the interest of the younger generation in traditional arts [1], and preservation is described as a task shared by communities and government [2]. The same concern is recorded in Aceh: the oral tradition nandong in Simeulue is at risk because few young people are eager to learn it [3], and Seudati is regarded as less attractive to the young [4]. National law treats arts and customs as objects of cultural advancement, which is pursued through protection, development, utilisation and fostering [5].

The Dampeng dance (takhi dampeng) belongs to the Singkil people, whose coastal identity has been shaped by Malay and Minangkabau influences [6]. Its movements imitate an eagle circling overhead, and it is presented in a circle at wedding ceremonies [7], which among the Singkil consist of a sequence of customary stages [8]. In Kampung Binanga, Rundeng District, the dance carries moral, social and religious values, and the circle is interpreted as protection of the honoured guest [9]. A textual study in Singkil District recorded eight to twelve dancers and noted that the dance, once performed by men only, is now also performed by women [10].

Research on its preservation is limited. One study in Dah Village, Rundeng District, interviewed a resident and village officials and listed preservation efforts such as a dance studio, teaching in schools and public performances [11]. That study did not report why interest has declined, did not include the views of young people, and did not relate the proposed efforts to the values that residents attach to the dance. Rundeng is one of the five districts that were separated from Aceh Singkil Regency to form Subulussalam City in 2007 [12], and the dance spread there from Singkil [9]. This study aims to describe (1) the reasons for the declining interest in the Dampeng dance, (2) the cultural values that residents attach to it, and (3) the measures and obstacles that residents identify for its preservation in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive design, which describes a phenomenon in its own setting and stays close to the informants' accounts [13]. It was conducted in the mukim (customary sub-district unit) area of Rundeng District, Subulussalam City, including Kampung Teladan Baru. Primary data were obtained through observation and interviews, and secondary data from books, websites and journal articles on the subject.

Five informants were interviewed as key informants: the mukim of Rundeng (R), two community figures (W and I), a young man (D) and a woman resident (A). They are identified by initials. Each informant was asked about four topics: the factors that reduce public interest in the Dampeng dance, the ways in which the dance can be maintained, the cultural values contained in it, and the obstacles to its preservation. The answers were grouped by topic and summarised.

3. Results and Discussion

Function and Form of the Performance

According to the mukim, the Dampeng dance is part of the customs of Rundeng and is performed at weddings, particularly when the groom is escorted in procession, at circumcision ceremonies and when important guests are received. At weddings it is usually performed in the early morning before the dawn prayer, and it entertains the bridal couple and the family. The dance is performed by eight to twelve men, accompanied by a singer (penghulu khonde) and musicians. Women are not permitted to take part. The dance is still used at customary events, but it is performed less often than in the past.

Reasons for Declining Interest

The informants gave three kinds of reasons. The first is exposure to outside cultures and modern entertainment. R stated that people are no longer interested because they have seen many outside cultures, and I stated that people used to present the dance proudly at every customary event, whereas young people are now occupied with modern entertainment. D, speaking as a young person, said that young people prefer music, dances and entertainment that trend on social media. The second reason concerns the performance itself: W stated that many people are dissatisfied because present performers are less appealing than earlier ones. The third

is the lack of opportunity to learn: D stated that the dance is rarely introduced at school or in youth activities and that there is no place to learn it, so that interest fades.

Cultural Values

Three informants described the values of the dance. D named togetherness, because the dance is performed in a group and requires cooperation and mutual respect, and responsibility, because each dancer must keep to the rhythm and formation. A named mutual cooperation, unity and politeness, which she saw in the orderly movements. I named togetherness, unity and respect for guests, and described the dance as part of the identity of Rundeng. He added that rehearsals and the preparation of the stage, music and costumes are done collectively and bring residents together.

Proposed Measures and Obstacles

The informants proposed four measures (Table 1). R proposed a Dampeng dance studio (sanggar) in which senior dancers teach children, and he intends to invite the village heads to hold socialisation at village level. W proposed open performances in busy public places on occasions such as the regional anniversary, the reception of visitors and Independence Day, because they are simple to organise, and he stressed pride in one's own culture. I asked for support from government and schools, for example through extracurricular activities and school arts events, for promotion beyond the region and for the regeneration of young dancers.

Three obstacles were named. R and W pointed to the low interest of young people, whom W described as difficult to engage on the subject. I pointed to the declining understanding of the customary meaning of the dance, which many now regard as entertainment only, and to the lack of government programmes such as training, competitions or festivals devoted to the dance.

Table 1. Summary of the informants' statements

Topic	Statements	Informants
Reasons for declining interest	Outside cultures and modern entertainment; social media trends	R, I, D
	Present performers regarded as less appealing than earlier ones	W
	Dance rarely introduced at school or in youth activities; no place to learn	D
Cultural values	Togetherness, unity, mutual cooperation	D, A, I
	Responsibility; politeness; respect for guests; local identity	D, A, I
Proposed measures	Dance studio with senior dancers for children; village-level socialisation	R
	Open performances at public events; pride in local culture	W
	Support from government and schools; promotion; regeneration of dancers	I
Obstacles	Low interest of young people; difficulty in engaging them	R, W
	Declining understanding of customary meaning; limited government programmes	I

Source: Interviews with five informants (processed by the authors).

Discussion

The reasons given for the decline agree with studies that link falling youth interest in traditional arts to globalisation [1] and with the situation of nandong and Seudati in Aceh [3], [4]. The young informant added a reason that does not concern taste: the dance is not taught at school or in youth activities and there is no place to learn it. Low interest is therefore partly an effect of

missing opportunities for transmission, and the informants' description of young people as unwilling should be read together with this statement.

The values named by the informants correspond to the social and moral values recorded in Kampung Binanga [9] and to the description of the dance as a symbol of cooperation in the community [7]; a comparable link between a group performance and social cohesion is reported for liké geleng in South Aceh [14]. The religious value recorded in Binanga [9] was not mentioned by the informants in this study. One informant observed that many residents now regard the dance as entertainment only, which indicates that knowledge of its meanings is transmitted less than the performance itself.

The measures proposed in Rundeng repeat those listed for Dah Village [11] and resemble strategies reported elsewhere. For the Baris Memedi dance in Bali, preservation rests on the community, the village apparatus, artists and government support [15]; in Sarolangun a local dance was taught through a school extracurricular programme until pupils had mastered it [16]; structured training is expected to raise interest in Seudati [4]; and young people in Laos were motivated to safeguard heritage when they learned together with a culture bearer and saw the value of cultural knowledge [17]. A studio in which senior dancers teach children is consistent with these findings and addresses the lack of a place to learn. The measures also fall within the protection, development, utilisation and fostering of culture set out in law [5].

Two points need attention. First, the measures are proposals: the informants did not report an existing studio, schedule or programme, and the same measures were already listed in 2023 [11], so the constraint lies in implementation and not in identifying what to do. Second, the rule that only men may dance limits the number of potential learners. Elsewhere the dance is now performed by men and women [10] or by women on certain occasions [7], and the Kerinci tiger dance became endangered when the right to learn it was confined to a small group [18]. Whether the rule should be retained is a matter for the customary community; this study records only that it narrows regeneration.

This study has limitations. Only five informants were interviewed, and the positions of two of them were not recorded. No dancers, singers, teachers or education and culture officials were interviewed, and no performance was documented in detail. The dates of the fieldwork were not recorded. The findings describe the views of these informants and cannot be generalised to all residents of Rundeng District.

4. Conclusion

The Dampeng dance is still performed at weddings, circumcisions and guest receptions in Rundeng District, but less often than before. The informants attribute the decline to outside cultures and modern entertainment, to performances regarded as less appealing than earlier ones, and to the absence of teaching at school and of a place to learn. They attach to the dance the values of togetherness, mutual cooperation, unity, responsibility, politeness, respect for guests and local identity. They propose a dance studio led by senior dancers for children, open performances at public events, socialisation at village level and school activities, and they identify low youth interest, declining understanding of customary meaning and limited government programmes as obstacles.

The mukim and village heads are advised to establish the proposed studio with a fixed rehearsal schedule and to explain the meanings of the dance during rehearsals. Schools in the district are advised to include the dance in extracurricular activities, and the city government to schedule it at public events. Future studies should interview dancers, teachers and officials, document performances, and examine the history, choreography and gender rules of the dance.

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Authors' contributions and responsibilities

Asih Winarty: supervision, methodology, writing – review & editing. Tarliana Lembong: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. Saifuddin: validation, writing – review & editing. Hasanah: validation, writing – review & editing. Ilham: validation, writing – review & editing. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The interview notes are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in a form that does not identify the informants.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study did not require institutional ethical clearance because it involved interviews with adult residents about a local cultural tradition and did not collect sensitive personal information. Each informant was informed of the purpose of the research and gave consent before being interviewed. Informants are cited by initials only, and their full identities are not disclosed.

Declaration of generative AI use

A generative AI system was used while this manuscript was being revised. Its use was confined to English translation, shortening and reordering of the text, tabulating the interview statements already present in the draft, and finding and checking published sources and regulations. It did not supply informants, quotations or findings. The authors reviewed the result against their interview material and take responsibility for all statements in the article.

Additional information

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