

Exploring the Elements of Main Zapin: A Preliminary Reports and Studies from Fieldwork in Johor

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Abstract

This paper presents a preliminary report on an ethnographic study of the elements in Main Zapin (Zapin play-performance), based on extensive fieldwork conducted in Muar, Johor. The research employed a comprehensive ethnographic approach, utilizing a combination of observation, participant-observation, and non-structured interviews to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of Main Zapin performances. By engaging with the local community and performers, this study aimed to unravel the artistic elements and community dynamics that underpin this traditional dance form. The methodology incorporated rigorous observations to capture the nuances of Main Zapin performances. Participant-observation techniques immersed the researcher in the cultural context, fostering a deeper understanding of the art form. Additionally, non-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich qualitative data, enabling the exploration of personal perspectives, experiences, and insights of individuals involved in Main Zapin. The incorporation of ethnographic techniques and non-structured interviews allowed for a holistic and in-depth examination of Main Zapin, enriching our understanding of its artistic expressions and cultural significance. Through this paper, the author aim to shed light on the diverse and vibrant aspects of Main Zapin, offering insights into the artistic elements and the lived experiences of the community. Through the utilization of an ethnographic approach and the incorporation of non-structured interviews, this research undertakes a thorough investigation of the various elements of Main Zapin. These elements, when examined collectively, enhance the artistic richness, cultural significance, and community engagement associated with Main Zapin. By shedding light on these aspects, this paper contributes to the preservation, appreciation, and documentation of this distinctive dance tradition.

Keywords: ethnographic report, *Main Zapin*, play-performance

Introduction

Zapin, a renowned dance tradition originating from Hadhramaut and introduced to Southeast Asia by Arab traders, has ingrained itself as an indispensable component of the cultural heritage of Malay and Malay-Arab communities in the region. Rooted in the amalgamation of Arab and Malay culture, Zapin has undergone significant transformations over time, assimilating diverse cultural influences and emerging as a dynamic and culturally significant genre of dance. This research focuses specifically on the practice of Zapin within the Malay community of Johor, located in the southernmost region of peninsular Malaysia. Zapin holds considerable cultural and religious significance and is commonly performed during Islamic calendar events, as well as at special occasions such as weddings and social gatherings. While Johor serves as a focal point for the examination of Zapin, it is important to note that the dance tradition extends beyond the confines of this region, encompassing various states across Malaysia, East Malaysia, and the broader Nusantara region, including Sumatra, the Riau Islands, the northern coast of Java, Kalimantan, Singapore, and Brunei.

The zapin dance tradition can be categorized into two distinct practices: “Main Zapin” (zapin play-performance) and “Tarian Zapin” (zapin dance). Main zapin is characterized by its spontaneous and improvisational nature, involving interactive call-and-response exchanges between pairs of dancers. This form of zapin is renowned for its playful nature, providing a platform for dancers to showcase their spontaneity and creative abilities. Conversely, Tarian Zapin encompasses meticulously choreographed

movements, emphasizing staged performances and predetermined sequences. Tarian zapin accommodates the participation of both genders, as it does not adhere to gender segregation norms.

The emergence of Tarian Zapin can be traced back to the introduction of choreographed Malay dances on stage. This practice gained prominence, redirecting public attention towards more formal renditions of folk dances, particularly those showcased in staged performances. Consequently, the popularity of Main Zapin as a *permainan* (play-performance) within intimate settings such as family gatherings and Malay weddings gradually waned. This decline can also be attributed to the rise of Malay social dance in Bangsawan theaters and entertainment centers during the 1930s, where Malay dances, including zapin, attained widespread popularity as forms of public entertainment. Moreover, the development of entertainment dance in urban centers such as Singapore, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and Ipoh played a pivotal role in the incorporation of zapin into the repertoire of choreographers in Bangsawan theaters and Malay films. The dissemination of Malay dances through mediums like television, radio, and co-curricular activities in schools further bolstered the preference for choreographed forms of dance, overshadowing the traditional and playful practice of Main Zapin.

The decline of Main Zapin, has persisted over an extended period, posing challenges in conducting fieldwork specifically focused on its practice within village contexts. However, in 2022, Persatuan Zapin Muar Johor (PERZIM)¹, a relatively small organization, embarked on a mission to revive and revitalize the fading essence of Main Zapin. Recognizing its cultural significance, PERZIM aimed to rejuvenate this traditional art form and restore its prominence. While Main Zapin traditionally thrives within familial settings, its presence in public spaces has been limited. In response, PERZIM has undertaken significant initiatives since 2022 to broaden the reach and promotion of Main Zapin performances. These efforts encompass organizing Main Zapin events, conducting workshops, and actively engaging with the community. Despite their dedicated endeavors, PERZIM encounters challenges such as insufficient funding to support the organization of events and a lack of consistent participation from younger individuals. However, there are encouraging signs as some young individuals express a keen interest in Main Zapin and demonstrate regular attendance at the events. Their enthusiasm suggests the potential for the tradition's continuity among the new generation. PERZIM's proactive measures and commitment to reviving Main Zapin serve as a testament to their dedication to preserving this cultural heritage. While obstacles persist, the organization's efforts to engage the community and cultivate interest among younger individuals offer hope for the sustained vitality and appreciation of Main Zapin in the future.

This paper explores Main Zapin interchangeably as both a 'dance form' and a 'dance event.' Main Zapin, as a dance form, is characterized by its rhythmic movements, intricate choreography, and the interaction between dancers and musicians. It holds significant cultural importance within the Malay community, particularly in Johor, Malaysia. The dance involves a structured series of movements performed in a playful and synchronized manner. One dancer typically leads, establishing the *ragam* or movement motifs, while others follow in coordinated fashion. Maintaining rhythmic flow and visual harmony is essential to the performance. As an event, Main Zapin serves as a unifying platform that brings together dancers, musicians, and the wider community in a celebratory and communal gathering. It provides an opportunity for the performance and appreciation of Main Zapin, fostering a shared experience among participants and spectators. The events associated with Main Zapin encompass a diverse range of occasions, including public performances as well as exclusive gatherings. These gatherings can be organized openly for public participation or exclusively tailored for specific groups, such as the one organized by PERZIM.

An ethnographic perspective is crucial in understanding Main Zapin as both a dance form and a communal event. Through ethnographic research, various elements such as movements, gestures, music, costumes, social dynamics, and the significance of Main Zapin within the broader cultural and social context can be examined. This approach involves exploring the meanings, interpretations, and experiences of dancers, musicians, organizers, and spectators, shedding light on the cultural values, traditions, and community dynamics associated with Main Zapin as a dance form and a communal event. To comprehensively explore the multifaceted aspects of Main Zapin, this research adopts an extensive ethnographic study, employing various research methodologies such as observation, participant-observation, and non-structured interviews. The primary objective is to illuminate the intricate artistic elements, community dynamics, and the lived experiences of both performers and community members engaged in Main Zapin. By integrating ethnographic techniques and conducting non-structured interviews, this study endeavors to provide a comprehensive exploration of Main Zapin, ultimately contributing to its preservation, appreciation, and documentation as a unique dance tradition.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive exploration and description of the multifaceted elements inherent in Main Zapin performances, specifically within the region of Johor. Main Zapin has traditionally been practiced in an intimate and exclusive manner, primarily within familial contexts. A noteworthy example of Main Zapin that extends beyond the Muar region is the Zapin Pekajang from Kampung Pekajang, Gelang Patah, Johor Bahru, which has been passed down through successive generations within the same family. This dance form has been diligently preserved and expanded upon by a lineage of heirs and adigurus. The Zapin Pekajang family-pratitioners, comprising nearly 50 immediate family members and relatives, adeptly exemplifies the improvisational and interactive nature of Main Zapin by showcasing their skills during familial gatherings. However, recent communication with them indicates that the practice of Main Zapin within their family settings has become infrequent due to various factors and circumstances (Mohamad Akmal bin Zainal Abidin, personal communication, 2022).

During the course of fieldwork conducted in Muar, Johor, a comparable familial practice resembling that of Kampung Pekajang was identified, albeit with infrequent instances of Main Zapin being practiced within immediate family circles. Notably, the family of Wan Arifin bin Sabran, who continues the legacy of Zapin Pat Lipat² from the late adigurus Subahil bin Hashim, Mahpop bin Mohd Zain and Md Amin bin Ma'osum, assumes the role of marwas player (a small double-sided, high-pitched hand drum originating from the Middle East) and actively engages in zapin dancing, occasionally partakes in the practice of Main Zapin within the private confines of their residence. This serves as an exemplification of the enduring existence of Main Zapin as a participatory and spontaneous form of artistic expression, albeit with reduced prevalence within the intimate familial context prevalent in Muar, Johor. It is important to note that this research focuses on the ethnographic findings within Johor and does not encompass other regions, limiting the author's ability to discuss notable variations or distinctive features specific to Main Zapin performances in comparison to other areas. By employing rigorous observation and participant-observation methods as the sole means of data collection, this objective strives to achieve an in-depth understanding of the distinctive artistic expressions exemplified in Main Zapin within the context of Johor.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding the zapin dance tradition provides a comprehensive understanding of its historical development, choreomusicological relationships, contemporary variations, and unique choreographic elements. They are myriad numbers of research that have been done on zapin, however, This literature review specifically examines key works and research articles that contribute to the scholarly discourse on Main Zapin, shedding light on its cultural significance and artistic intricacies.

One of the foremost authorities in the field, Mohd Anis Md Nor, has made substantial contributions to the study of Main Zapin. His seminal work, "Zapin: Folk Dance of the Malay World," published in 1993, investigates the historical origins of Zapin from Hadramaut and its subsequent transformation into a national dance form in Malaysia. The book provides valuable insights into the historical background and structural aspects of Main Zapin, elucidating its evolution over time (Md Nor, 1993). In the chapter titled "Cari ... Cari ... Cari! Filling the interstices of music and dance in Zapin Johor," featured in the book "Sounding the Dance, Moving the Music," Mohd Anis Md Nor explores the intricate choreomusicological relationships within Main Zapin. He examines both the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities that shape these relationships, drawing attention to the embedded structures and elements within the music and movement, as well as the contextual cues and prior knowledge of the performance traditions (Md Nor, 2016). In his other work, "Blurring Images, Glowing Likenesses: Old and New Styles in Traditional Dances of Malaysia" (2001), Mohd Anis Md Nor traces the changes within the zapin dance genre, highlighting the emergence of three distinct styles in contemporary Malaysia. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of Main Zapin and its adaptation to the modern context.

The term 'Main' and 'Main Zapin' have yet to be explored by researchers especially in the dance field. In the context of the dance of the Malay world, the term "Main" carries a significant connotation, referring to the act of dance or dancing itself. The essence of Main Zapin resides in the intricate interplay of "call and response" and is executed in an improvisatory manner. The concept of "Main" is characterized by its inclusive and embracing nature, with performances serving as social events meant for the participation of all present (Md Nor, 2001). The concept of Main, does not restricted to the narrow definition of 'dance' or universal understanding of 'dancing' as 'performing' on the proscenium stage. In literal term, "Main" in

Malay means playing or having fun as in sports or in performance (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2017). This term has been widely used in Malay social dance to denote the act of “playing-the-dance or play-performance” as in Main Zapin or “zapin game-play performance”. The term “Main” is not unfamiliar to the Malays, as it is commonly used in their daily lives and extends to other Malay traditional performing arts such as Main Kuda Kepang, Main Puteri, Main Makyung, and Main Wayang. Within the context of zapin, traditional zapin performers do not perceive zapin solely as a form of dance, but rather as an act of “Main” or engaging in a game (Md Nor, 2001). Thus, to perform zapin is to “play” or “Main” zapin. The individual who performs zapin is referred to as a “Pemain Zapin” while the entire configuration of a Main Zapin event is also known as “Permainan Zapin.”

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study draws upon ethnographic approach and centers on the investigation of the artistic elements within Main Zapin performances. The study adopts a qualitative fieldwork approach, emphasizing non-structured interviews, extensive observations and participant-observation techniques to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of Main Zapin. The study aims to present a thorough analysis rooted in observation-derived data, with particular attention given to the discussion of these observation findings.

Observations assume a critical role in this study, serving as the foundation for the systematic documentation of various facets within Main Zapin performances. Meticulous attention to detail enables the researcher to record the entirety of events, including musical components, choreographic elements, and visual aesthetics that define these performances. This approach contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the dance form and its expressive qualities. In addition, participant-observation techniques immerse the researcher within Main Zapin performances, providing firsthand experiences of the explorative play-performance inherent in the tradition. Through active engagement with performers and immersion in the cultural context, the researcher gains a deeper appreciation for the artistic expressions and innovations manifested within the tradition.

The primary fieldwork activities involve attending a series of Main Zapin events held since 2022 in various locations throughout Muar, Johor, such as Kampung Parit Tengah, Kampung Seri Menanti Darat, and Kampung Parit Nombor 4 (Parit Bugis). These events predominantly transpire in village settings during the evening, typically unfolding in front of residences owned by event organizers, often within patios or houseyards. The observed participants encompass two distinct groups: those familiar with Main Zapin and those newly introduced to the culture. This diversity facilitates a comprehensive understanding of various aspects, including dance movements, musical practices, execution improvisations, communication dynamics during performances, vocalizations, audience responses, and the adaptable spaces allowing for spontaneous audience engagement.

The study utilizes a combination of participant and nonparticipant observation techniques to gather data. As a participant observer, the researcher actively engages with various stakeholders within the community, including cultural beholders, master-teachers, and both male and female participants. This approach facilitates a diverse range of responses and insights during performances. Furthermore, the researcher enhances their understanding by actively participating in various roles, including that of an audience member, dancer, and musician. On specific occasions, the researcher also assumes the role of an emcee, particularly during Main Zapin events. This multifaceted involvement allows for a comprehensive exploration of Main Zapin performances and enables the researcher to effectively adapt and tailor the dance to align with the specific research objectives and requirements. These active and passive observation roles collectively contribute to the comprehensive collection of data for analysis.

Data collection methods comprise watching, listening, experiencing, and recording, all of which contribute to a multi-sensory approach that captures the nuanced aspects of Main Zapin performances. Video and audio recordings serve to preserve the performances and facilitate accurate analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, photographs are taken to document visual aesthetics, costumes, and spatial arrangements, providing additional insights into the visual elements of Main Zapin.

Findings and Observations

Elements of Main Zapin

In-depth research, meticulous observation, and active involvement with the local community have yielded valuable findings and observations pertaining to the multifaceted components that shape Main Zapin. This exploration delves into the intricate interplay between various elements, such as dance, music, costumes, space, and time, unraveling the tapestry that defines Main Zapin's cultural significance and artistic complexity. By illuminating these interconnected aspects, a comprehensive understanding of Main Zapin emerges, providing insights into its profound impact and enduring presence within the communities that uphold this treasured dance tradition.

Main Zapin Dance and Music. This research recognizes the inherent interdependence of dance and music within the realm of Main Zapin, thereby providing an all-encompassing depiction that amalgamates these two fundamental components. In the vernacular of the kampung community, the term "Main Zapin" typically refers to the integrated practice of both dance and music. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Main Zapin can manifest in various forms, where either dance or music may take precedence while the other remains absent. By delving into the dynamic interplay between dance and music, a more profound comprehension of the intricate artistic constituents that shape Main Zapin performances can be attained.

The arrangement of Zapin movements, choreography, and formations within Main Zapin exemplifies a discernible blend of spontaneity and significance for the dancers. A remarkable emphasis is placed on the creation of intricate patterns and formations—such as rectangular and circular shapes along with vertical and horizontal lines. These geometric elements contribute to the visual aesthetics of the dance, adding further depth and complexity to its choreographic compositions and contributing to the dance's artistic essence. The dancers adeptly navigate their movements in relation to one another, maintaining a cohesive and synchronized presence throughout the entire performance. This emphasis on coordination is further reinforced by the meticulous floor patterns that serve as a guiding framework for the dancers' steps. The dancers' execution of movements in Main Zapin is characterized by a deliberate and structured approach. Each step and gesture is executed with precision, contributing to the dance's overall aesthetic appeal. The interaction between the dancers, as they move in harmony and respond to one another's cues, amplifies the visual impact of the performance. This deliberate emphasis on pattern and formation attests to the meticulousness and precision that define Main Zapin, thereby accentuating its artistic and choreographic intricacies.

The interplay between dance movements and the structural music forms the foundation that governs and regulates Zapin performances. In a typical Zapin performance, whether it is in the form of Main Zapin or Tarian Zapin, the music adheres to a conventional pattern consisting of taqsim, pantun, kopak, and wainab. These structural components serve as significant markers for determining specific sections within the dance. Main Zapin performances adhere to a specific convention where each section of the dance corresponds to specific musical sections. As part of the customary practice, zapin performers enter the dance area in a disciplined manner, either in single file or double rows. Upon entering, they present a salutation in response to the musical prelude or Taksim, signaling the commencement of the performance. Following the salutation, the performers arrange themselves linearly, standing side-by-side or facing each other, as they repeat dance motifs and follow a recurring forward and backward floor plan. In the context of Main Zapin, the dancers' movements assume a significant role in the performance, characterized by a lively and spirited rendition of dance motifs that are executed in a specific chronological order. Typically, a lead dancer takes the initiative and signals ragams (movement motifs) using numerical names such as Langkah Satu, Langkah Dua, Langkah Tiga, and Langkah Empat, or distinctive names like Langkah Silang, Langkah Lenggang, Langkah Acah, and Langkah Potong Wajik, each representing specific movement characteristics. This structured approach allows for the seamless repetition of dance motifs, ensuring a coherent and uninterrupted rhythmic flow throughout the performance.

The footwork in Main Zapin adheres to a predetermined convention, encompassing specific steps, directions, and pathways that demonstrate a relative consistency among dancers. However, dancers retain a certain level of creative freedom to modify the footwork, allowing for personal artistic expression. This may involve introducing variations in turns, skipping certain steps, or deviating from the original footwork while still maintaining the fundamental choreography and rhythmic patterns that define Main Zapin's distinctive style. The repeated footworks, arising from repeated movements in Main Zapin give rise to various

geometrical forms (Fauzan & Hussin, 2018). This can be seen in several langkah such as Langkah Lenggang and Langkah Potong Wajik.

Regarding gestures, dancers enjoy a degree of flexibility to incorporate swaying and hand movements that align with their personal preferences and comfort, complementing the direction of their body's movement. The dancers' focus is typically directed towards their body's orientation, occasionally accompanied by head movements such as shaking their heads to acknowledge mistakes or nodding to affirm the correctness of their partner's movements. In straight line formations, their gaze is directed forward, or they may shift their focus to their partner to synchronize their movements. Alternatively, they may observe the movements of other dancers to maintain a harmonious and synchronized performance as a cohesive group.

In every zapin performance, the music maintains steadfast adherence to the convention of chronological *taqsim*, *pantun*, *kopak*, and *wainab*. The *taqsim* signifies the entry of the dancers into the performance space, accompanied by salutations. The *pantun* phase encapsulates the execution and playful exploration of the dance motifs, as the dancers gracefully express their movements in response to the music. The *kopak* segment manifests when the dancers adeptly assume a squatting position on the eighth beat of the musical section, contributing a distinct rhythmic element to the performance. Finally, the *wainab* denotes the culmination of the dancers' graceful play, as they conclude their movements while maintaining the squatting position. However, it is important to note that while the structural components of *taqsim*, *pantun*, *kopak*, and *wainab* serve as a general convention in zapin, they are not rigid rules but rather guidelines. In the context of practice in Muar, there is room for changes and exploration. For instance, musicians may deviate from the traditional sequence by skipping the *taqsim* and starting the song with *marwas* beats and *kopak*. They may also extend or shorten the *pantun* or double the *wainab* cycle. Additionally, in some cases, musicians may repeat the song from the beginning even after playing the *wainab*, indicating that the performance is not yet concluded. These variations and adaptations reflect the dynamic nature of Main Zapin and the flexibility within the artistic expression of the musicians and dancers.

The flexibility of Main Zapin music in Johor is evident in various instances. For instance, during an exclusive Main Zapin event³ organized for PERZIM's committee members on November 4th, 2022, the performers chose to utilize only the *marwas* beats as the primary instrument, excluding the melodic instruments and structure typically associated with zapin music, such as *gambus* and *accordion*. This decision allowed for greater flexibility, as the musicians and dancers could determine the conclusion of the beats and when to initiate the *kopak* section. Effective communication between the dancers and musicians played a pivotal role in facilitating a playful and improvisational atmosphere during the performance. In another Main Zapin event on March 10th, 2023, the proceedings commenced with the *marwas* beats while awaiting the arrival of the *gambus* player. During this period, the dancers engaged in dancing and singing along with the rhythmic beats of the *marwas*. These instances highlight the adaptability and spontaneity within Main Zapin performances, where musicians and dancers make adjustments and create synergies based on the availability of instruments and the specific context of the event. Such flexibility allows for the exploration of new possibilities and adds a dynamic element to the Main Zapin experience.

Within the context of Main Zapin, the social dynamics among dancers, musicians, and community members contribute to the inclusive and interactive nature of the practice. There are no barriers between dancers and musicians, fostering a sense of camaraderie and collaboration. After finishing their dance performances, dancers often join the musicians or sit among the audience, blurring the boundaries between performers and spectators. This creates a space for dialogue and engagement, where dancers may also showcase their musical skills or invite musicians to participate in the dance. Additionally, during the Zapin Lambak⁴ or Zapin Rewang⁵ segment of the event, all community members are invited to fill the space and join in the dance, further promoting inclusivity and community participation (As illustrated in Figure 1 below).



Figure 1. 'Zapin Lambak' or 'Zapin Rewang' inclusivity in Main Zapin (Source: Fieldwork, June 9th, 2023)



Figure 2. Young and old unite in the harmonious rhythm of Main Zapin (Source: Fieldwork, May 12th, 2023)

Gender plays a significant role in Main Zapin practice. Traditionally, there is a clear separation between men and women during the dance. Men dance with other men, and women dance with other women. Women typically only dance with men who are their immediate family members, close friends, or their respected dance teachers. This practice reflects cultural norms and a sense of propriety within the community. Age also influences the dynamics of Main Zapin, as older participants may have limited stamina and dance less frequently, while younger individuals are more active and engaged throughout the entire event. However, there are occasions where intergenerational partnering occurs, particularly when older individuals do not have their regular dance partners present. In such cases, younger dancers willingly step in to partner with them, demonstrating respect and solidarity across age groups (See Figure 2 for an example of diverse generations in Main Zapin).

Performance Settings. The practice of Main Zapin, encompassing both the dance and music components, typically takes place in modest and intimate settings within the confines of a residential compound. Often held in the hall or on the veranda of a house, these spaces provide a conducive environment for the performance and appreciation of Main Zapin. Salimi bin Mohd Shah, a highly esteemed master-teacher renowned for his expertise in Zapin Mahpom and Zapin Ginjat/Dinjat, has established a longstanding tradition of hosting Main Zapin gatherings at his veranda (See Figure 3 for an example of Main Zapin on a veranda). Accompanied by a dedicated group of musicians and his students, these gatherings serve as significant occasions that hold various purposes. They serve as opportunities to celebrate

special occasions such as Hari Raya, commemorate noteworthy achievements, or simply act as a platform for reuniting individuals after extended periods of separation.



Figure 3. Main Zapin on a veranda (Source: Fieldwork, June 9th, 2023)

Salimi, known for his exceptional musical talents displayed through his mastery of the accordion, gambus, and marwas, once orchestrated a notable public Main Zapin event held at a nearby homestay.⁶ This event attracted a substantial crowd consisting of his students, close friends, family members, and other esteemed individuals. The event, characterized by its informal organization, saw Salimi taking on various roles including musician, dancer, host and emcee. Its attendance by a diverse assemblage of at least a hundred participants exemplified the collective support and active engagement prevalent within the Main Zapin community.

The Main Zapin event, is normally held in the spacious yard or grounds (See Figure 4) adjacent to the organizer's house, serving as a fitting venue to showcase the elegance and vibrancy of this esteemed dance form. The house, acting as a central hub for the gathering, provides an intimate and familiar setting for the participants and spectators alike. The carefully selected location adds a touch of warmth and authenticity to the event, fostering a sense of community and cultural connection. The choice of the house yard or house grounds as the primary venue for the Main Zapin event carries significant cultural significance. It represents a continuation of age-old traditions, where the community would gather in a familiar and comfortable space to celebrate momentous occasions. The utilization of the organizer's house not only reflects the hospitality and generosity of the host but also creates a convivial atmosphere that enhances the overall experience of the event.



Figure 4. The Main Zapin performance space—houseyard (Source: Fieldwork, May 12th, 2023)

The house yard or grounds offer several practical advantages for hosting the Main Zapin event. Its open-air setting provides ample space for the performers to showcase their intricate footwork and graceful movements. The surrounding environment, adorned with lush greenery or traditional decorations, contributes to the visual aesthetics and enhances the ambiance of the performance. Additionally, the proximity of the house ensures easy access to facilities and amenities required to accommodate the participants and attendees, including refreshments and restroom facilities. Furthermore, the choice of the house yard or house grounds as the venue for the Main Zapin event strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of togetherness. By utilizing a space intimately connected to the organizer's residence, the event becomes a manifestation of communal unity and collective celebration. It provides an opportunity for neighbors, friends, and extended family members to come together, share in the joyous occasion, and partake in the cultural heritage embodied by *Permainan Zapin*. While the Main Zapin event traditionally takes place in the house yard or house grounds, it is important to note that the dance form has also adapted to modern contexts. In recent years, performances have been organized in larger venues such as community centers, cultural halls, or outdoor stages. These alternative venues allow for larger audiences, ensuring that the cultural significance of *Permainan Zapin* reaches a wider demographic. However, it is essential to strike a balance between the traditional setting of the house yard and the need for accessibility and visibility in contemporary settings.

In accordance with tradition, the Main Zapin event typically takes place during the nighttime hours, commencing shortly after the Isha prayer and extending late into the night. This timing choice adds an enchanting aura to the proceedings, as the darkness accentuates the vibrant colors of the costumes, the rhythmic beats of the music, and the graceful movements of the performers. The decision to hold the Main Zapin event at night carries profound cultural significance. It aligns with the concept of nocturnal festivities, which have long been an integral part of Malay cultural traditions. By immersing participants and spectators in the mystical ambiance of the night, the event creates a captivating atmosphere that heightens the emotional impact of the performances. The ambiance created by the available lighting in the context of Main Zapin performances adds a captivating and ethereal dimension to the overall experience. The presence of limited LED lights, combined with the dim lighting and decorative lights scattered around the performance space, contributes to the visual allure of the event (See Figure 5). The interplay of light and shadow creates a mesmerizing atmosphere, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the dancers' movements and the overall ambiance of the performance.



Figure 5. The Main Zapin nighttime ambience (Source: Fieldwork, May 12th, 2023)

The nighttime setting also allows for a more immersive and intimate encounter with *Permainan Zapin*. The absence of daylight distractions enables attendees to focus their attention on the intricacies of the dance, the melodies of the music, and the cultural expressions conveyed through the performance. Moreover, the cooler evening temperatures offer a more comfortable environment for both the performers and the audience, ensuring an enjoyable and memorable experience for all. Furthermore, the duration of the Main Zapin event extends into the late hours, often concluding around midnight. This extended timeframe provides ample opportunity for multiple performances, showcasing different styles of zapin, and allowing

for a comprehensive representation of the dance form's richness and diversity. The lengthier duration also enables participants and spectators to fully immerse themselves in the mesmerizing rhythms and enchanting atmosphere, embracing the night as a time of cultural celebration and appreciation.

It is important to note that while the traditional timing of the Main Zapin event is at night, there have been adaptations to accommodate modern lifestyles and preferences. In certain instances, particularly when the event is held in larger venues or as part of organized festivals, the performances may be scheduled to conclude earlier, around 11:00 PM. This adjustment aims to cater to the needs of a broader audience and ensure that participants and attendees can enjoy the event while also considering practical considerations, such as transportation and personal commitments.

Main Zapin Costumes and Attire. The Main Zapin event embraces a spirit of freedom and versatility when it comes to costumes and attire. Attendees are granted the liberty to express their personal style and individuality, allowing for a diverse array of fashion choices. While there are some general trends observed, such as men commonly donning the Traditional Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga and women opting for the elegant Baju Kurung, there are no strict requirements or regulations dictating specific dress codes. The absence of prescribed guidelines or restrictions regarding attire reinforces the inclusive nature of the Main Zapin event. It encourages attendees to dress comfortably and in a manner that best suits their preferences, while still respecting the cultural significance and celebratory atmosphere of the occasion. This flexibility allows individuals to showcase their personal fashion sensibilities, incorporating modern or traditional elements into their ensembles.

The informal and unrestricted nature of the Main Zapin event attire serves as a reflection of the dance form itself. Main Zapin has always been adaptable and open to diverse interpretations. This openness is reflected in the freedom of choice afforded to attendees, enabling them to celebrate and appreciate zapin while expressing their own unique style. The absence of strict dress codes fosters a welcoming and inclusive environment, accommodating attendees from various backgrounds and walks of life. It eliminates any potential barriers or constraints, encouraging individuals to participate and engage with the event in a manner that feels most authentic to them. This inclusivity contributes to the vibrant and lively atmosphere that characterizes the Main Zapin event, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural appreciation. It is important to note that while the Main Zapin event allows for individual freedom in attire selection, there is still a deep-rooted respect for cultural norms and customs. Attendees are expected to demonstrate modesty and cultural sensitivity in their dress choices, aligning with the values and traditions associated with Malay culture. This expectation is implicit and understood by all participants. This consideration ensures that the event maintains its cultural integrity and remains a space for collective celebration and reverence for tradition.

Findings and Observations

Social Dynamics

The social dynamics within the Main Zapin community are characterized by tradition and continuity, inclusivity, interactivity, intimacy, flexibility and adaptability. These dynamics shape the relationships and interactions among dancers, musicians, and community members, contributing to the richness and vitality of the dance form.

Tradition and Continuity. Main Zapin is deeply rooted in tradition, passed down through generations within specific families or communities. The preservation and continuation of this dance form rely on the commitment of individuals who act as heirs and adigurus, responsible for upholding and expanding upon the dance's legacy. The families of Wan Arifin bin Sabran, Salimi bin Mohd Shah, and Mohd Iskandar Shah bin Abdullah play a significant role in upholding the continuity of Main Zapin by preserving and transmitting specific dance forms within their kinship networks. These families exemplify the intergenerational transmission of Zapin Pat Lipat, Zapin Mahpom and Ginjat/Dinjat, and Zapin Parit Sakai, respectively, showcasing the rich cultural heritage and traditions associated with Main Zapin.

Within these families, the knowledge and skills of their respective Zapin forms are passed down from one generation to the next. Older family members act as mentors and guardians of the dance, teaching the intricacies, movements, and musical nuances to the younger members. Through direct instruction, practice sessions, and shared experiences, the dance forms are carefully transmitted, ensuring their preservation and continuity. The commitment of these families to Main Zapin extends beyond their familial

bonds. They actively participate in community events, cultural performances, and festivals, where they showcase their dance forms to a wider audience.

Inclusivity, Interactivity and Intimacy. Main Zapin embraces inclusivity, interactivity, and intimacy, creating a strong sense of community among its participants. Traditionally practiced in intimate and exclusive settings, such as family gatherings, Main Zapin provides a platform for showcasing the dance and fostering a shared experience. The spontaneous arrangement of Zapin movements and the interplay between dancers and musicians contribute to an inclusive and interactive atmosphere, where everyone feels involved. The linear and straightforward style of Main Zapin allows for continuous repetition, maintaining a rhythmic flow that encourages participation and engagement from all members. There are no barriers between dancers and musicians, fostering a sense of camaraderie and collaboration. After their dance performances, dancers often join the musicians or mingle among the audience, blurring the boundaries between performers and spectators. This integration creates a space for dialogue, where dancers may showcase their musical skills or invite musicians to join them, further enhancing the interactive nature of the practice. Furthermore, during the Zapin Lambak or Zapin Rewang segment of Main Zapin events, inclusivity and community participation are emphasized. This segment invites all community members to fill the space and join in the dance, transcending any distinctions between performers and audience. This collective participation reinforces a sense of togetherness and community spirit, allowing individuals of all ages and backgrounds to connect through the shared experience of Main Zapin.

Gender and age play significant roles within the practice of Main Zapin, influencing the social dynamics and interactions among participants. Traditionally, there is a clear separation between men and women during the dance, with men dancing with other men and women dancing with other women. This practice reflects cultural norms and a sense of propriety within the community. Women typically only dance with men who are their family members, close friends, or respected dance teachers. This reinforces the importance of maintaining appropriate relationships and preserving cultural values. Gender separation during Main Zapin performances also serves to uphold traditions and ensure the comfort and modesty of the participants. Age also affects the dynamics of Main Zapin, as older participants may have limited stamina and dance less frequently compared to younger individuals. Younger dancers are often more active and engaged throughout the entire event. However, it is not uncommon for intergenerational partnering to occur, especially when older individuals do not have their regular dance partners present. In such cases, younger dancers willingly step in to partner with them, demonstrating respect and solidarity across age groups.

Flexibility and Adaptability. Main Zapin adheres to established conventions in music and dance while also allowing for flexibility and adaptability. This means that practitioners have the freedom to incorporate personal creativity and expression while staying true to the essence of the art form. Musicians, for example, can introduce new melodies or rhythms, adding freshness and innovation to the performance. This interaction between musicians and dancers fosters improvisation and enhances the artistic experience. Similarly, dancers can modify movements and choreography, showcasing their unique style and creativity. These adaptations are influenced by individual preferences, interpretations, or regional influences. The ability to incorporate new elements while maintaining the core characteristics of Main Zapin demonstrates its flexibility and adaptability.

The flexibility and adaptability of Main Zapin allow it to evolve over time and cater to different contexts and preferences while preserving its traditional roots. This ensures that the dance form remains engaging and relevant for both performers and audiences. By embracing new influences and creative expressions, Main Zapin rejuvenates itself, striking a balance between honoring its heritage and embracing contemporary sensibilities. This dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation sustains the vitality of Main Zapin as a living cultural tradition, enriching the experiences of participants and observers alike.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Main Zapin embodies a complex and multifaceted cultural phenomenon wherein the intricate interweaving of tradition, community dynamics, and artistic expression occurs. The social dynamics observed within the Main Zapin community underscore the dynamic interplay between individuals, spanning across generations and encompassing diverse gender roles, thus fostering the essential continuity and safeguarding of this esteemed cultural heritage. Furthermore, Main Zapin surpasses conventional delineations of performer and audience, engendering an inclusive and actively participatory milieu. The dance form's inherent adaptability and flexibility provide ample space for personal creativity and localized

variations, effectively revitalizing its time-honored customs. Through the shared engagement and collective experiences engendered by Main Zapin, social ties are fortified, and a profound sense of belonging takes root among its constituents. In essence, Main Zapin functions as a cultural bedrock, deftly bridging the chasm between past and present, while exalting the cherished values, traditions, and aspirations of the community. Its perpetuation through intergenerational transmission, alongside the cultivation of an inclusive ambiance, and its ability to adapt to evolving contexts, unequivocally guarantee its abiding significance within the broader cultural landscape, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the indomitable spirit of Main Zapin for generations to come.

Endnotes

¹ Persatuan Zapin Muar Johor (PERZIM) is a registered association under the Registrar of Societies (ROS). The establishment of this association has been a long-anticipated endeavor, and it came to fruition through a formal meeting conducted by the sponsor committee members on May 29, 2022. Subsequently, the necessary groundwork was carried out to secure the official registration of the association with the ROS. The approval for PERZIM's registration was granted on August 9, 2022. A significant milestone in the association's journey occurred on October 1, 2022, with the successful organization of the First Annual General Meeting (AGM) held in the Kampung Sungai Balang Besar, Muar, Johor to appoint leaders for the two-year term spanning from 2022 to 2024. Coinciding with the First AGM, PERZIM organized its inaugural official event, the "Malam Santai Permainan Zapin" (Relaxing Evening of Zapin Play-Performances). This event marked an important milestone in PERZIM's activities and garnered considerable attention, attracting more than 200 attendees, from Muar and beyond.

² The founder of Zapin Pat Lipat maintains a close affiliation with religious institutions, facilitated by notable individuals such as Ustaz Subahil bin Hashim, an esteemed religious scholar, and Imam Nasir bin Mahmud, among others. The appellation 'Pat' within the context of this Zapin variant denotes the numerical abbreviation 'four' in the Javanese language, known as 'papat.' This term specifically alludes to the four distinct *langkah* (movement steps) observed in the Zapin Pat Lipat. Currently, the number of individuals perpetuating the legacy of Zapin Pat Lipat is limited. Notable among them are members of the Wan Arifin bin Sabran family, including Wan Shafazila binti Wan Sabran (daughter), Wan Nurhanim binti Wan Arifin (daughter), Muhammad Ammar Zafri bin Mohd Zamri (grandson) and Marsya Azyan Zahra binti Mohd Zamri (granddaughter). In the region of Muar, several other individuals outside of this family have commenced the continuation of this tradition. These individuals include Zainudin bin Jumingan, Mohd Haizal bin Supian, Nurul Umaiza Amira binti Supian, Mohd Iskandar Shah bin Abdullah, Nur Irwani binti Abidin, and Nur Wajihah binti Iskandar, among others.

³ An exclusive Main Zapin event is an occasion that is intentionally restricted to a specific group of individuals and not open to the general public. In this particular instance, the event is exclusively organized for the committee members of Persatuan Zapin Muar Johor (PERZIM).

⁴ Zapin Lambak is a recent term used to describe spontaneous and collective dancing among zapin practitioners. This term may have been influenced by the term "Joget Lambak," which refers to mass dancing in a carefree manner.

⁵ Zapin Rewang is another term used to denote mass zapin dancing. The combination of the words "rewang" and "zapin" highlights the cultural significance of "rewang," which is a traditional practice associated with wedding preparations among the Malay community. "Rewang" (Javanese term. Malay: *Gotong-royong*) refers to the communal gathering and collaborative efforts involved in the preparations for a communal celebration.

⁶ It is worth noting that while Salimi's immediate family members may not have participated in the dance or music itself, their wholehearted contributions to the event's organization underscored the cohesive familial support that underpins the practice of Main Zapin.

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