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Seudati Inong The Female Form of t h e Martial Art Genre in Meulaboh, West Aceh, Indonesia

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Indonesia
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Aceh, the northernmost province of Sumatra (known as *Serambi Mekah* 'The Verandah of Mecca') has a wealth of Muslim musical genres and body movement or dance forms. It was one of the first provinces of the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago to develop musical art forms associated with Islam. Unlike in many other Muslim societies, the Acehnese have a martial art tradition which is integrated into performances and includes female as well as male heroism.

Seudati

In Sufi mysticism as practised in Aceh and elsewhere, the ecstatic movements of the body are recognized as the expression of spontaneous emotion caused by the experience of the divine. *Seudati* is the best-known Acehnese expression of this. It is believed to have originated in the Pidi area of northeastern Aceh, but is now found all over Aceh's coastal areas and even in parts of the interior. In coastal Aceh, *seudati* is usually performed by men, except in West Aceh, where it is common amongst women as well. The body percussion and dance or concerted body movement used in the performance is a centuries-old Muslim tradition found not only in Aceh but also in parts of North Africa and West Asia.



The ureueng dancers in a *seudati inong* performance.

In Sumatra, males, not females, perform most Muslim associated art forms. Even when a dance by a mixed couple is portrayed, both roles are played by men. This is because of the Muslim preference not to have women performing on stage in front of men. However, a range of specifically female genres is performed by groups of teenage girls in West Aceh (and elsewhere). They range from laments at the death of a child to *seudati inong*, the female song and dance form based on the art of self-defence.

Seudati is performed in open air, either by a group of eight men, a soloist, and his assistant (*seudati agam*), or by a group of eight women, a soloist and her assistant (*seudati inong*). Whether male or female, the performers accompany their movements with body percussion, beating out interlocking or sharp, striking rhythms with their hands on the ground, hand clapping and chest slapping. The dancers sing poetry in *panton* (Malay) or *syae* (Acehnese) form with verses either telling of Aceh's past glory or presenting religious themes, topical events, or political ideas. *Seudati* and *seudati inong* are nowadays generally performed at wedding ceremonies or other joyful occasions. In former times, performances often lasted all night for several successive nights. Shorter versions have been devised for present-day use, such as when troupes are invited to perform at a government or corporate function.

In the female *seudati*, led by a *syék* (female commander and song leader) and her assistant, the performers present a series of song-dance sections in varying tempi. A major feature of the music is tempo change, from relatively slow, through to medium-fast and fast. Another feature is the variety of timbres and rhythmic pat-

terns provided by the girls' body percussion, including finger clicking and hand and thigh clapping (instead of chest beating as in male *seudati*) while they sing.

Three *seudati* performances

In a sequence of three *seudati inong* performances, which we recorded in Meulaboh in 1983, a group of teenage girls performed the dance-songs based on the art of self-defence. Eight of the ten girls on stage were singer-dancers and two were solo singers who played the role of commander and assistant respectively. Apart from the *syék* and assistant, who sat separately, the whole group kneeled closely together in a row. Following customary practice, the singers began with the standard greeting to request the forgiveness of their audience for any mistakes in the performance, after which they sang a local version of the Arabic phrase *assalaam mualaikum*, and gave thanks to Allah for all His gifts. They moved together in a wave-like fashion – back and forth, or from side to side, sometimes with every second performer moving diagonally backwards while her immediate neighbours moved diagonally forwards. They clapped their hands together or beat their shoulders and other body parts to produce interlocking rhythmic sections or sharp rhythmic statements.

The First Performance

The *syék* opened the first performance by singing a four-tone melody to a text, which offered greetings to the parents of a boy to be circumcised, as well as to the guests present. After a while, the members of the chorus clicked their fingers in a cyclic rhythm. The chorus then echoed the soloist's line, continuing into a section of rhythmic finger clicking which alternated with a section of rhythmic clapping. Subsequent verses referred to the Prophet, sometimes alternating between sections of soft or loud singing and body percussion sections without singing. To the accompaniment of the finger-clicked and hand-clapped rhythms by the members of the *ureueng*, the soloist moved into a medium-fast metre, singing a three-tone melody. Soloists and chorus each sang very short phrases in alternation

Seulamat datang bapak ngon ibu
Keunoe neutuju u Aceh Barat
Ranup neupajoh di dalam puan

Welcome, men and women present
To this place in West Aceh
We prepare betel nut in the container

Mulia rakan mameh suara
Ha ellallah alah e han
Han neutem rila Putroe Baren
Han neutem rila

We pay our respects in sweet voices
Oh
Putroe Baren does not want people to do certain things
Does not want them to do certain things

Ha ellallah Putroe Cut Baren
Duek ateueh meuligoe
Ka geuduek sidroe geutueng puasa

Oh Putroe Cut Baren
Sits on a raised throne
She sits alone and fasts

to their own clapped and finger-clicked rhythmic accompaniment. The last section, in fast tempo, continued to alternate between the soloist's melodic line accompanied by the performers' singing and interlocking body percussion segments.

In this case, the text refers to startling events, including earthquakes and the fasting of heroine Putroe Cut Barén, who possesses mystical powers. The text contains both Muslim and pre-Muslim references (e.g. betel nut offerings).

The Second Performance

In the second performance the *syék* started by singing the customary greeting to Allah and the Prophet as well as the guests. She sang in slow metre to a five-tone palette, after which the chorus repeated the *syék's* melodic line and text. The slow, unmetred singing by both soloist and chorus without body percussion in some sections contrasted with the metered singing accompanied by body percussion in others. The dancer-singers described their dance movements in their song texts as well as dancing them, dwelling on the fact that they all came from the same school, and alluding to themselves in verse as small yellow birds.

The Third Performance

In the third performance, the two *panton* (quatrain couplets) presented images of boats, the sea, a river, flowers and a garden. They alluded to the verse's real meaning – that the sad male singer is waiting for a girl (a flower) to grow up so that he can marry her, and that he is crying at the thought of such happiness. Since there is a reference to the port of Singkil in the southwest, we may assume that the *pan-*

ton verses probably originated or were popular in southwest Aceh. However, the verse is adapted slightly to the occasion of this performance.

The three items described above are in typical *seudati inong* style. The young female dancer-singers produce a specifically female musical sound and movement, but like the extremely vigorous male *seudati agam*, both reflect a specifically Acehnese Muslim piety, fervour, and artistry infused with the Acehnese martial spirit.

Music referred to in this article (with transcribed texts and translations) may be heard on the author's compact disc entitled 'Muslim Music of Indonesia: Aceh', which is part of a 16-volume CD set entitled 'The Music of Islam' (Executive Producer Eckart Rahn), Celestial Harmonies, 1998, available by e-mail at (celestial@harmonies.com) and on internet at <http://www.harmonies.com> ♦

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Bismillah ratep meuseukat
Taloe peuet urat geupuphon sambong
Allah nibak malam nyoe
Allah kamoe meunari
Allah dalam istana
Allah kamu meunari

With Allah's permission we sing this sad song
Four pieces of rope begin to be joined up (to bear the corpse)
Allah tonight
Allah we dance
Allah in the palace
Allah we dance

Deungo lon kisah uroe kiamat
Malam Jumeu'at phon teuka geumpa
Geumpa keudua malam Aleuhah
Geumpa ka meuhah 'oh watee isya
Nyawong geutanyoe di dalam badan
Barang pinjaman siat tuhan bri
Oh troh bak watee ka neucok pulang
Nyawong lam badan tuhan peurebre

Hear the following story
On Friday night the earthquake began
The second earthquake was on Saturday night
The earthquake happened after Magreb prayers
Our souls are contained in our bodies
Our lives are borrowed for a short time
When the time comes (Allah) takes our lives back
From our bodies soon we shall be separated