

# ARABIC CONNECTIONS: TRANSLATING PERFORMATIVE SUFISM IN THE MALAY ZAPIN AMONGST MUSLIM SOCIETIES IN INSULAR SOUTHEAST ASIA<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

*Zapin* is one of the oldest traceable forms of folk and social dance and music genre in the Malay world in Southeast Asia. Created through syncretic borrowing and adaptation to the eclectic performative nuances of the Arabic *Zaffin* of the Hadrahmaut Arabs in present day Yemen, the Malay *Zapin* is both a hybrid and a highly syncretized dance and music tradition of Muslim communities of Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2011: 42-47). From its beginning in the thirteenth century, *Zapin* music and dance have been reinvented through the syncretic adaptations of the Hadhrami-Arab trader-settlers' performative dance and singing genre, creating a hybrid performancetraditionembodyingindigenouscreativeexploits merging two different worlds, the patriarchic Arab-Islamic performative traditions and the bilateral-Malay-Islamic influences. This has led to the creation of two different styles of *zapin*: in the Straits of Malacca, an older variant known as *Zapin Arab* (Arab *Zapin*) and the generic Malay *Zapin* known as *Zapin Melayu*. The Arab-Malay worlds came together to produce the Malay *Zapin* through the processes of engaging Islamic aesthetics while affirming an Islamic worldview and

belief system in the Malay maritime communities of the Straits of Malacca. *Zapin Arab* is an exclusive dance tradition of the Arab decent groups while *Zapin Melayu* is performed by Malays in Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Sumatra, and in the Riau Archipelago.

*Zapin*, a hybrid and heavily syncretized music and dance tradition in insular Southeast Asia, continues to evolve today. From its beginning in the form of *Zaffin* dance and music of the people of Wadi Hadhramaut (Arabic: *أبوتومرضح* *Hadramawt*) of the Hadhramis who speak Hadhrami Arabic, the tradition took root in the Malay Peninsula, Singapore and throughout the islands of Indonesia from the 15th century onwards in the form of a peculiar tradition that embodies Arabic-Malay-Islamic nuances. The large-scale Hadhramaut migration in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century brought sizeable Hadrami minorities all around the Indian Ocean including Southeast Asia (Engseng Ho 2006). The Hadhramis, from the formerly independent Qua'iti and Kathiri sultanates encompassing a historical region of the south Arabian Peninsula extending eastwards from Yemen to the borders of the Dhofar region of Oman, brought along their highly tribal society of old Seyyid aristocracy who were descendent of the Prophet Muhammad to Southeast Asia. Indigenous Muslims who lived on the coastal shores of East Sumatra, west peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Java, Kalimantan, South and Southeast Sulawesi, Ternate, Halmahera and the islands of Nusa Tenggara were highly impacted by the presence of the Hadhrami who migrated from historically important cities such as Shibam, Say'un and Tarim, which contains the highest concentration of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad anywhere in the world. From these ancient cities, the Hadhramis brought *Takhmis* and *Qasida* (religious music), metric composition of sung poem in Arabic poetry philosophizing life and religious matters; *Dan*, a form of music; and *Zaffin*, a music and dance form that is exclusively performed and practiced by the Hadhrami Arabs from Wadi Hadhramaut.

Aside from being highly revered as Sada (plural for Seyyid or Syed [ديس]) who are descendants of Prophet Muhammad), the

Hadhramis who comprise two main groups in Southeast Asia, namely Ba'Alawi and Irsyadin (Shahab 2012), were considered as highly literate in religious matters and were often employed as qadhi or legal specialists and scribe. The Hadhramis even became rulers in the Sultanate of Siak and Palembang in Sumatera, Pontianak in West Kalimantan, and married into royal families in the Malay sultanates of Peninsular Malaysia. The Hadhramis' art of playing music with the oud or *al-'ud* (pear shape lute, which is locally known as the *gambus*), hand held drums (*marwas* or *marawis*) and singing *Takhmis* and *Qasida* by the Ba-Alawi Hadhramis were easily adopted by indigenous Muslims with adaptations that made indigenous performances markedly different from their Arabic origin and are examples of permissible (*mubah*) performances.

In the case of Hadhramis' *Zaffin*, their dance and music are commonly associated with the *qabilah* (tribe) or *bani* (origin to a common forefather) of the Ba-Alawi. The Hadhramis performed *Zaffin* within close quarters for the Ba-Alawi lineage seldom allowed others including the indigenous population to participate. This practice has lasted to the present time in Southeast Asia through the endogamy marriage institution and in spite of moving towards mix marriages over the last few decades. Hadhrami *Zaffin* are performed regularly on the eve of Friday, the Muslim holy day of the week, and at wedding ceremonies or on very important Islamic celebrations such as the Maulid (Prophet Muhammad's birthday), in their white head cap, *qamis* (male robe), *abaya* (black robe for women), and *radi* (long shawl for men).

### **Hadhrami *Zaffin***

*Zaffin* is an exclusively male performance tradition performed by Hadhrami Ba-Alawi either as secular performing arts or in the form of mute ritualized *dhikr* (Arabic: *ذِكْرٌ*, plural *رَكَدَا* *adhakār*, which means remembrance, pronouncement, or invocation of the names of God). In Southeast Asia, *dhikr* is considered an important extension to the recitation of *doa* (ordinary supplication to ask for divine blessing in general). *Dhikr* (remembrance of God's name or reciting litanies) takes the form of methodological repetition of the first *shahadah* (proclamation of one's belief in Allah and in his

messenger Muhammad) or the names of God or of God's "most beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) or some formula such as "Allah hayy" (God is the Eternal one) with prescribed gestures, and has become one of the fundamental rituals in *tariqah* or *tariqat*. A gathering to perform the *dhikr* ritual usually takes place in private homes or in closed public spaces. Such gatherings could be convened with the presence of a culturally structured movement system and musical accompaniment (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 35).

*Dhikr*, as a performative litany, reinforces the quality of the state of being as a mode of temporality through the way of the *sharia't*, which literally means "the road to watering place." It implies the act of seeking the knowledge of the ultimate truth or "*haqiqah*" by the aspirants or *murid'in* through *tariqah* guided by the *murshid* or sheikh. Reciting litanies through *dhikr* has been observed in the Arabic *zaffin* by practitioners or *murid'in* of *tariqah* al-Alawiyah otherwise known as the Ba-'Alawi in Hadrahmaut and in Southeast Asia. Ba'Alawi (اب يولع) is a term derived from Bani Alawi (بن يولع) or origin to a common forefather whose *silsilah* or lineage is founded by al-Faqih Muqaddam As-Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali Ba'Alawi al-Husaini (who died in 653 AH or 1232 CE) who had studied from the students of Abu Madyan, who was a student of Abdul Qadir Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriyyah order. The members of Ba'Alawi *tariqah* are mainly Sayyid or Syed (ديس) whose ancestors hail from the valley of Hadhramaut. Hence, the 'Alawi Sayyids who had spread far and wide to the Malay Archipelago not only spread Sunni Islam from the Shafii school but also, to a certain extent, the Ba'Alawi *tariqah* of Sufism.

The Hadhrami Ba'Alawi *Zaffin* serves as a common bonding agent for the Hadhramis through recreational just-for-fun play or *laeb* amongst men, which is slightly different with the *jambiya* dagger dance or *bara* to express tribal solidarity. *Laeb* or play makes performing *Zaffin* as a dance of the *qabilah* (tribe). *Zaffin* as *dhikr* or performative litany reinforces *Zaffin* as *tariqah* exclusively for the *bani Ba'Alawi*, lineage of a common forefather. For any of these soirées, the dance is performed in pairs by men who dance together forward and backward, retracing steps, skip and jump

over several measures of music before being replaced by a new pair of dancers retracing their own steps and dance motifs, evoking an uninterrupted cycle over the outpouring of poetic narratives on the attributes of Prophet Muhammad.

### **Zapin-Melayu (Malay Zapin)**

The Malays created the Malay *zapin* from the Arab *zaffin* as a hybrid form that signifies respect and admiration to the Hadhrami Arabs or Sayyeds in particular. The Malays in Malaysia adapted and developed the nuances of Islamic-Arabic *zaffin* by creating their own pseudo-Arabic expressions through *Zapin Melayu*, an example of hybridity and syncreticity par excellence (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2011: 42-43).

Malay *Zapin* (which is now known by various other names such as Jipin, Jepin, Japin, Zafin and Dana in Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei and Singapore) celebrates events associated with weddings, circumcisions, and social events of religious significance such as Maulidur Rasul (Prophet's birthday). It has taken root amongst the Malay-Islamic communities in the Straits of Malacca to become one of the most widely spread Malay-Islamic folk dance and music traditions in insular Southeast Asia.

### **Zapin Music And Dance**

*Zapin* music, which usually accompanies the *zapin* dance, is played in three different sections; the *taksim*,<sup>2</sup> an improvised solo played by a single *'ud* or *gambus* (lute) player; the melodic section with *kopak*, a loud rhythmic *marwas* drumming pattern in interlocking style; and *wainab* or *tahtim*, which forms the coda that utilizes an extension of the main melodic phrase and the loud *kopak* drumming pattern (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2004: 128-130). The divisional units or sections in the *zapin* music have become generic in areas along the Straits of Malacca.

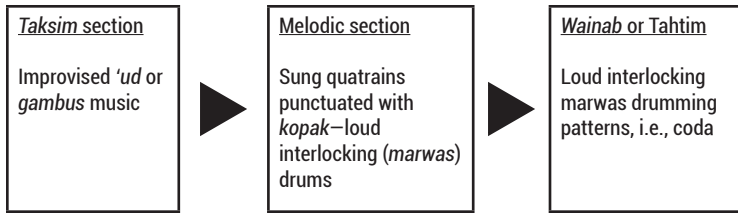


Fig. 1: Music sections

The musical sections of *zapin* music correspond with the sections of the dance performance. *Zapin* performers enter the dance area in a single file or in double rows before sitting in front of the audience or the *'ud* or *gambus* player (lute) as a salutation to the musical prelude or *Taksim*, played by a single *gambus* (lute) player. This is to be followed by the linear formation of *zapin* performers who dance facing one another with repeating dance motifs while tracing a recurring forward and backward floor plan, interrupted by a series of skips and squatting positions, which is also known as the *kopak*. At the end of each performance the dancers perform jumping and squatting dance motifs to the accompaniment of relatively faster drumbeats in the form of the *wainab*.

*Zapin* dancers are required to master the basic units of dance consisting of eight beat dance steps, which are repeatedly performed throughout each dance. There is a slight difference in executing the dance steps. *Zapin* performers begin each eight-beat phrase by remaining motionless on the first count before stepping the left foot on the second count and continuing with the right foot on the third count. This is alternately done with both feet for the rest of the eight beat phrases. Each of the dance steps and its accompanying arm and hand movements is the most basic unit of movements that is still void of any specific meaning. The smallest meaningful unit of *zapin*, however, emerges after the fourth count when a series of basic units are combined to become eighth beat phrase that form dance motifs, which are recognized as *langkah* in Malay, equivalent to the concept of dance steps.

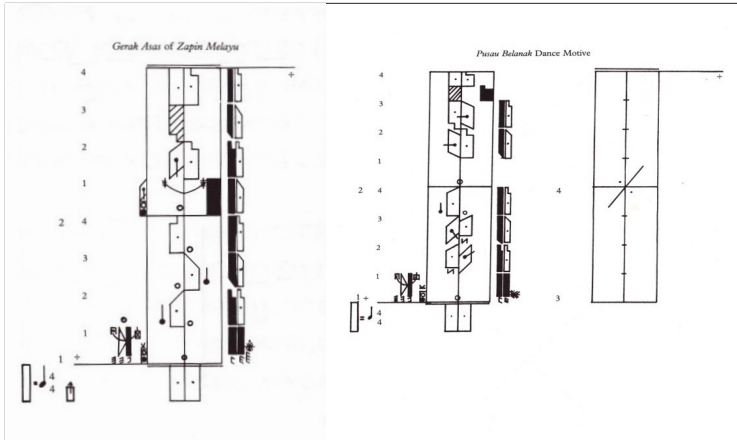


Fig. 2: Zapin dance motifs

### Ritual of the Qalb through Performative Sufism

*Zapin* has extrinsic and intrinsic values that give different meanings to its beholders. *Zapin* is extrinsically a performative display of dance and music invented to the nuances of Malay-Islamic aesthetics from an Arabic derived tradition commonly performed to celebrate weddings and other social events. Intrinsically, *Zapin* contains Sufistic (mystical movement) structured movement and music systems associated with the spiritual path or ‘way’ of the Sharia’at (*tariqa* or *tarikah*) of self knowledge that leads to a knowledge of God. The search for a direct mystical knowledge of God and of his love is to be found in the twofold presentation of God in the Qur’an, which describes the God almighty as the creator, lord, and judge, while also seen as abiding in the believer’s heart. The goal to achieve a blissful union with the ultimate reality, i.e., God through *Dhikr* (remembrance or mention of God) and *sama’* (hearing). Hence, poetry, music and structured body movement may be used as an aid to reach the state of communion with God as seen by the “eye of the heart” or *Qalb*. The concept of *Qalb* or the “eye of the heart” attunes the heart to communion with God by embodying the notion of *al tawhid*, the concept of an absolute transcendent Creator that is one and unique (*wahid*). Such concepts are embedded in theosophy, a philosophical and mystical

system that claims a direct intuitive insight into God's nature. *Qalb*, "eye of the heart" is one of the three central ideas of *Nafs* ("self", "ego", "soul" or "psyche"), the *Qalb* (eye of the heart) and the *Ruh* (spirit). These three central ideas have been expounded by Sufistic commentaries to experience divine revelation through Islamic Sufistic science or 'Ilm al-Nafs (Arabic: علم النفس) that deals with the notion "self" or "psyche". In the performative traditions of *Zapin* music and dance in insular Southeast Asia, *Qalb* as the spiritual heart nourishes the soul (*Nafs*) and direct the spirit (*Ruh*) towards Divine connection. Hitherto, nurturing the *Qalb* with *dhikr* (remembrance or recitation of the divine names) that is muted by non-verbal inward recitations can be observed in the *zapin* dance and music along the coastal areas of maritime Southeast Asia.

Sufism was diachronically introduced into the Malay world in Southeast Asia through the incorporation of *Tariqa* or *Tariqat* (way of the sharia't). Anthony H. Johns writes:

The end of the thirteenth century, which saw the earliest physical evidence of an Islamic port city in north Sumatra, marked the beginning of a strong forward movement of Islam in the region. By this time *tariqa*, however various in the forms they assumed, were already playing a major role in maintaining the unity of the Islamic world after the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258 and the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate. When Ibn 'Arabi died in 1240, the monistic theosophy of the Sufi tradition was well articulated and widely diffused. This, together with the fact that the earliest extant manuscripts from north Sumatra, albeit some three centuries later, showed evidence of a strong concern with such a theosophy seemed to suggest a causal relationship between the development of theosophical Sufism and Islamization in our region. (1995: 170).

*Zapin*, which is traceable after the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511, was present in both forms: the Arab *Zapin* and the Malay *Zapin*. Diachronically, the Malay *Zapin* was invented by the Malay-Muslims from the Arab *Zapin* by heavily adapting to



Malay aesthetics and cultural nuances. However, as an extant tradition, both forms of *Zapin* continue to become the vehicle for performative Sufism in the Malay world. On the one hand, the Arab *Zapin* is used as a performative Sufistic practice by the Ba'alawi Arabs diaspora from Hadhramaut; the Malay *Zapin*, on the other hand, has intrinsically continued to serve the longing for an experiential awareness of God and a yearning to be with God induced by *Dhikr* (remembrance) accompanied by music and dance leading to exuberances of theosophical expression. *Dhikr* or remembrance/mention of God in *Zapin* is executed through methodological repetition of the proclamation of one's belief in Allah from the *Qalb* and not uttered from the mouth. The utterance of the *Dhikr* from the *Qalb* stresses an inwardness of contemplating God's existence and his absolute transcendence. Here lies the corpus of the intrinsic meaning of *Zapin*, through which *dhikr* in *Zapin* affirms the conception of oneness and absolute transcendence of God in an otherwise extrinsic display of dance and music within the domain of Malay music and dance. In other words, *zapin* signifies both secular and religious affiliations designated by its practitioners. The semantics of *zapin* are both secular and spiritual. As a performance to be viewed for celebratory reasons or engaging social events such as weddings, circumcisions, or events of communal significance, *zapin* becomes a secular event. However, *zapin* could be a form of mute *dhikr* (remembrance, mention of God) from the *Qalb* "eye of the heart" consisting of mental or verbal repetition of one of the divine names over the regular four beat counts of drumming pattern executed through repetitive steps of dance motifs and music in their *tariqat* (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 33-39).

These have privileged Malay *zapin* dance and music as the most common base for artistic explorations in permissible dance and music forms in Muslim societies in the Straits of Malacca. Remembering God through *dhikr* in *Zapin*, however, is covertly practiced by followers of Naqshabandi *tariqat* within the region of the Straits of Malacca and the Riau Archipelago. To some extent followers of other *tariqats* such as Sammaniya (in Palembang) and Kalwatiyyah (South Sulawesi) have also used *Zapin*. It is unknown

if the *tariqats* Shattariya (Java), Qadirriya or Rifi'iyya engaged *Zapin* although the Ba'alawi Hadrahmi Arab continues to patronize the Arab *Zapin* as *Dhikr*. One of the principles of Naqshahbandi's path is "seclusion in the midst of society" which is commonly interpreted as being inwardly focused on God whilst outwardly taking active part in the life of the community (Bruinessen, 1996: 9), hence reciting the silent *Dhikr* from the Qalb secludes the practitioners in the midst of the *tariqat*, whilst performing *Zapin* openly precluded active participation in an indigenous but Islamic performative tradition at social-religious events.

Dancing the *zapin* or playing *zapin* music as a ritual of the Qalb are represented by silent *dikhr* while embodying the body movements or musical pulses as pulses of the silent *dhikr* utterance. It is done by performing *zapin* within the 16-beat colotomic unit compound structure of *zapin* drumming patterns. The overarching rendition of *zapin* songs consisting of repeated quatrains of passionate verses in praise of Prophet Muhammad and/or the attributes of God, either literally or metaphorically, provides the spatial and sonic space for *dhikr*. Although dance movements only begin on the second drumbeat, which is of low timbre as it initiates the *kinemic* pulse, *dhikr* is first uttered during the first high timbre beat of the *marwas* drums. The *Dhikr* verse from the shahadah, *Lā ilaha illal-Lāh*, ("There is no god but Allah") commences on the high timber beat while the dance begins on the low timbre beat, which forms the second drumbeat. The entire *zhikr* would be completed at the end of the 8-beat phrase of repetitive rhythmic 4-beat pattern of three or more *marwas* drums. By then, the *Zapin* dancer would have completed his dance motif as he also completes the first round of his *dhikr*. This would be repeated over the 8-beat phrase into a second round of *dikhr* as the dancers complete his dance over 16-beats colotomic unit (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2009: 33-39).

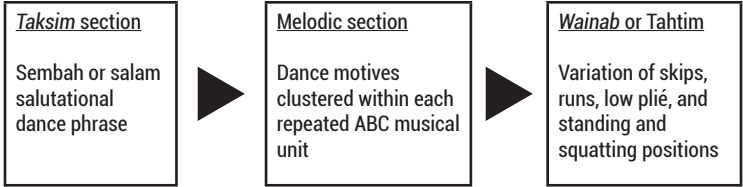


Fig. 3: Summary of the Zapin dance

**Awal Bismillah**  
(Gelang Patah, Johor)  
[rough outline]

Taksim - Gambus (free rhythm)..... Biola w/gambus drone (free rhythm)..... Gambus improv..... to **zapin rhythm** [4 beats]

5 **Zapin rhythm** [4 beats] played 5 times .....

10 **Verses I, II, III, IV** (each verse is [A: 5 bars + A1 5 bars, B: 6 bars + 5 bars], followed by **Wainab** [4 bars of zapin rhythm [total 20 beats as above)])

13 **Verse I -- sketch** 2-bars instrumental [drums, accordion, gambus, biola, zapin rhythm]  
A - wal Bis-mil-lah A - wal Bis-mil-lah mu-la-di su-rah,

18 **A1** 2 bars instrumental as above  
A - wal Bis-mil-lah A - wal Bis - mil-lah mu-la di su-rah,

23 **B** Chorus..... 1 1/2-bars instrumental  
Su- dah di su-rah su- dah di su-rah \_\_\_di gu-lung tu-dung, Ya Da Ya Da \_\_\_

29 **B1** Chorus .....  
Su- dah di su-rah su- dah di su-rah \_\_\_di gu-lung tu-dung, Ya \_Da Ya \_Da Ya \_ Da Ya \_Da.

34 **Wainab** (4 bars)

Fig. 4: Example of Zapin music motifs

38 At end of Verse IV, to final **Wainab** -- 4-bar sections -- exended to end of piece/dance, as follows ---

"Al-lah a-nah"

42 Accordion/Gambus, Drums loud.....

Drums very loud.....

46 Accordion Gambus Accordion

Drums very loud..... Drums soft/muted.....

50 Accordion Gambus

"cari...cari..."

54 Drums soft/muted.....

Accordion

"cari..."

58

Drums loud to end of piece .....

62

"sa-lu a-neh..."

Fig. 5: Ritual of the Qalb (لقب) in Zapin Colotomic unit of Dhikr

Within these chronological grammatical choreographic units, the *zapin* dancers interact with drummers and other *zapin* musicians with mnemonic vocalizations while sustaining the silent dhikr over improvised dance motifs. To the practitioners of Tariqat Naqshabandiyah, most of the improvisations that deal with syncopated dance movements within a colotomic unit of *zapin* music provide both spatial and sonic space for the inward contemplation of God's oneness and peerlessness, the spiritual essence of *Tawhid*, which emanate from the heart or *Qalb*.

## Conclusion

Hitherto, *Zapin* and the ritual performance of the *Qalb* or “eye of the heart” through *Dhikr* or “remembrance” are both extrinsically and intrinsically interrelated performance representing two levels: as a performative social/folk genre inclusive to all and as a spiritual/mystical exercise of *taṣawwuf* exclusive to those who adhere to an allegiance of Sufistic practices. In the case of maritime Southeast Asia, the followers of Naqshabandi (Malays) and Ba’Alawi (Hadrahmi Arabs) are privileged to practice *Zapin* as *Dhikr* in the ritual of the *Qalb*. As part of the Islamic Sufistic science of ‘Ilm al-Nafs (Arabic: علم النفس) that deals with the notion “self” or “psyche”), the *Qalb* consumed *Zapin* within ritualistic performative practices of *Dhikr*. Performing the *Qalb* through *Zapin* music and dance does not only give primacy to Sufism in the Islamized region of maritime Southeast Asia but enhances the spiritual appeal of Sufism in the region through the efficacy of *Zapin* as an indigenous but hybrid performance tradition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been adapted from *Ritual of the Qalb: Performative Sufism in Zapin* presented at the 42<sup>nd</sup> ICTM World Conference, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 11-17 July 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Taksim is derived from the Arabic word “taqsim,” which means “division” or “distribution” and refers to a special improvisational musical form that is guided by the Makam system, a system of melody types, which provides a set of rules for composition.

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