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Empowering Women Through the Lens of Matriarchy in Creating Contemporary Dance Work "SOPAN"

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ABSTRACT

For this paper, I produced a choreography in dance work emphasizing the scope of matriarchy or empowering women by exploring semiotics through movements. In general, women have often been looked at as sex symbols from the perspective of gaze and are often looked at as weak. My practice as research attempts to review the status of Malay women in Peninsular Malaysia by examining the impact of Islamic revivalism and industrialization on the Malay family, kinship, and marriage system through *Adat Pepatih*, which is norm-based practice in one of the states in Malaysia, Rembau, Negeri Sembilan into a dance choreography title SOPAN. This research looks at the semiotics ideology in societal behavior related to the practice of *adat perpatih* and transforms to contemporary dance choreography by looking at the movement's symbolism and costume related to religion (symbol) towards the developments in the modern era. In this research, I argue how religion reform and automation have had similar effects in increasing gender differences, paternalism, and misogyny, shifting the rule of bilaterality in the direction of patriarchy and considerably undermining the status of Malay women in both traditional and modern society. In Malaysia particularly the *adat* (culture) has been sat under one pillar, which has made the concept of *adat* concept is seen as bad according to the religious point of view. While the perspective of the community sees women who dress less politely as not showing good manners. To address this, I have used Schechner's Workshop-rehearsal/performance model to make this contemporary choreography and look at the theory of semiotics to peel the process of producing SOPAN works that highlight the movement's ideas and costuming. This creative work metaphorically explained the meaning of SOPAN from the perspective of matriarchy. Through this discourse, the view from the semiotic foundation perspective will support the ideology of *adat* in modern society.

Keywords: Matriarchy, Choreography, Gaze, Gender, Contemporary Dance

Introduction

There has been an accumulation of studies about the Minangkabau Malays in Negeri Sembilan back to British colonial times. However, most of these were historical studies by colonial officers¹. A major part of such society

is the customary law of *adat perpatih* which has been practiced by the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia from the past until the present. Extensively as part of

¹For example, see Lister (1887,1890,1891), Parr and Mackray (1910), Taylor (1929,1948) Moubray (1931), and Winstedt (1934,1935,1954). For critical reviews of these studies and detailed references, see Peletz (1981,1988).

the intangible cultural heritage (ICH), *adat perpatih* was brought to the Malay land in the 19th century by the immigrant of the Minangkabau from West Sumatra, Indonesia. *Adat perpatih* which was available in Negeri Sembilan today is the blended version of the existing *adat* in the Malay community and also the customary law that the Minangkabau immigrants brought. Instead of *adat perpatih*, which represents the identity of the Malays of Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, there are other customary laws, which are also known to the Malays and were practiced in other parts of the states, namely *adat temenggong*. These two *adats* are highly regarded as one of the cultural identities of the Malays in Malaysia as they adhered to the *adat* in every aspect of their lives. *Adat perpatih* follows the matrilineal system, which is reflecting on its Minangkabau ancestry through the immigration of West Sumatran people to the Malay land; meanwhile, *adat temenggong* follows the patriarchal system which inherits from the father's side (Peletz, 1981).

The Religious Affairs Sector of the Rembau branch of the UMNO (United Malays National Organization) started a political movement for the abolition of *adat*, asserting that the inheritance rules of *adat*² were haram (illegal) from the viewpoint of Islamic law. Under Islamic law, all the land and property must be inherited bilaterally, whereas *adat* law differentiates ancestral land (*harta pusaka*³) from individually acquired land (*harta carian*⁴). The matrilineal *adat* law is applied to ancestral land, thus confining its inheritance to women. In Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan is the only state in which this custom of matrilineal inheritance is practiced. In the district of Rembau, said to be the most conservative and the strongest in *adat* tradition, this custom became the target of UMNO's harsh criticism. Thus an anti-*adat* campaign was carried out as part of a movement to sweep away anti-Islamic customs. As some of the *adat* chiefs (Lembaga) supported this movement, some Rembau women stood up against the men and proclaimed that they would divorce any husband who supported the

abolition of matrilineal *adat*. In the end, the issue was resolved when some of the Lembaga was forced to resign, and so the attempts of the anti-*adat* reformists failed.

From the context approach of the Malay community in Malaysia particularly in *Rembau, Negeri Sembilan*, a matriarchy is an approach and practice that is used to show the power, rights, or strength of women to own something, dominate, and obtain absolute ownership of the property, property rights, and influence that allows a tribe to be seen as dominated by women and articulately described our fascination with ancient matriarchs through her book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* (Eller, 2013). According to her, matriarchy allowed us to imagine other women as people whose biological sex and not immediate status provide the perspective of women's strong leadership, creativity, or autonomy, either ridiculous or suspect. It provided a vocabulary for "dreaming of utopia and a license to claim that it was not mere fantasy, but a dream rooted in an ancient reality". The influence of this culture and approach has made the choreographer produce his work within a matriarchy approach, named "SOPAN," an award-winning work at the YOKOHAMA Dance Collection 2022, performed by Natasha Koo, and Jocelyn Tay Mei Xuan after Jazlyn Tan Jia Yu, and Nurul Elyana Hamdan. Both performers graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts, School of Dance and Theatre, Singapore.

This practice research work takes a perspective and practice approach from a man's view (researcher as a male choreographer) towards women's rights, which are often manipulative or considered a sex symbol, especially when dressed sexily, seductively, and dominating some emotions or aspects by using their physical forms. This choreographic research tries to challenge those perspectives by emphasizing that women do have their own influences and should be seen through their characters, thinking, and rights while maintaining the dignity of these women and honors. In Malaysia, one of the Southern States, Negeri Sembilan, practices "*Adat Perpatih*," which is a notable example of the concept of matriarchy (<https://www.ns.gov.my/kerajaan/info-negeri/adat-perpatih>, n.d.) In *Adat Perpatih*, women's influence and domination have the absolute right to family inheritances and marital property, indirectly protecting women in the family if they are divorced or abandoned by their spouse. This practice nevertheless prevents the husband from doing polygamy which is seen as contrary to the sunnah of Prophet *Rasulullah S.A.W* in which the men have the right to marry and own four wives at a time if the husband is sufficient, Fath al-Bari (9/329). Therefore, *Adat Perpatih's* practices are intended

²Based on Malaysia Dictionary (Kamus Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) 4th edition, *adat* is a rule (action) that is commonly followed or carried out since ancient times; way (behavior) that has become a habit; the form of cultural ideas consisting of cultural values, norms, laws and rules which are related to one another to form a system.

³(Harta Pusaka) Inheritance is defined by the Distribution Act 1958 and the Inheritance (Family Provision) Act 1971, both of which lay out the conditions of inheritance. Civil law allows for the personal wishes of an individual to dictate the ownership of an estate upon their death through the use of a will.

⁴(Harta Carian), According to Section 2, Islamic Family Law (State of Selangor) Enactment 2003, "matrimonial property" is defined as property that is acquired jointly by husband and wife during their marriage effective according to the requirements set by the Islamic Law

to defend woman's rights; hence they are not oppressed and used at will. Observation of women's influences these days, especially within the perception of society by men, these women are often misinterpreted and presented as not capable of being leaders due to certain factors such as physical strength, being fragile in making decisions, and always being represented in the form of character which is needed to serve the opposite gender will.

Gradually as the concept of women's empowerment started to grow within the communities, and conversations about women's contribution to society were getting more expansive, bigger, and robust. Over time, with the myriad ways women tend to become powerful and empower the world around us, the idea of matriarch in society is becoming salient. Most of society, where the majority of the rights belong to men, often sees women as companions rather than pleasers. In some religious contexts, women are shown as someone who need to be cared for, pampered, and given attention. Moreover, this duty relies on the responsibility of the husband once married. The man's duty and responsibility are expected to take care of his wife as a woman who has given birth to his son or daughter and to lighten the burden of managing family affairs. Men are often responsible for every heavy job because women are considered weak. Gradually, a change is witnessed in societal structure with women now adapting roles established for men, evident from the fact that many top leaders of countries worldwide are dominated by women these days. The closest example is the New Zealand Prime Minister, led by Jacinda Ardern (Gallagher, 2019).

Matriarchy vs. Patriarchy

Women are no longer expected to settle for housewifery. Just like men, women can now comfortably pursue a career of their choice while balancing the requirements of a mother and a wife. Thus, family setups have changed completely when compared to four or five decades ago. Men, too, have evolved their roles such that some of them are embracing the role of a stay-at-home dad. Therefore, it is safe to say that patriarchy and matriarchy in family settings have tremendously progressed to ensure fairness. Similarly in workplaces, the level of equality and equity between a male and a female employee has improved; however, this is yet to be evidenced in other societies, in the Middle East nations, hence suggesting the presence of societal structure as a discriminatory factor (Kelbert & Hossain, 2014).

Unlike in the past, when husbands would dominate their wives, domestic violence has been on the decline. This is due to the implementation of laws such as the Domestic Violence Act implemented by the Malaysian government in 1994 (Randawar & Jayabalan, 2020), which has ensured the safety of wives and young girls from vicious men. Such acts and various other factors have contributed to reduced patriarchal dominance in families. It can be stated that matriarchy is less belligerent compared to patriarchal leadership in a family setup. Thus, with increased matriarchal ascendancy in families, the chances of conflict have reduced among the society. The revolution from patriarchal to matriarchal leadership in families has been enhanced by feminism, which received serious recognition in the 1970s as observed by Lebovic (2019). It was not until the 70s that women were allowed to use their maiden names without being obligated to take their husbands' last names. This was the beginning of the matriarchal revolution. Again, an argument against a patriarchal society can be pointed to the times before the 1970s.

It is impossible to argue against the reversed roles taking place in our current society. However, this is demonstrated in certain parts of the world. Some cultures still practice strong patriarchal supremacy like Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as observed by Costa-Font & Györi, (2019). The question involving reserved roles on the basis of gender is subjective, whereby different scholars have different opinions. There are situations and occasions where matriarchal dominance has been disadvantageous, in which patriarchal setups have shown some signs of positive effects. Therefore, although patriarchy is gradually losing its dominance, only some support the changes. Once again, this depends on a scholar's viewpoints. Nonetheless, Carli and Eagly (2001) illustrate that society can tremendously benefit from a matriarchal system. The argument is that patriarchy has been plagued with violence, which is male-dominated. The explanation for men's love for violence is based on their nature rather than nurture. Even though society is still patriarchal, women's influence is everywhere, from families to workplaces and even in sports suggesting a stronger presence and growth of matriarchy not as a challenge to patriarchy but as a better social management system.

Patriarchy is a widespread gender ideology that positions men as rulers of private and public life in a house. Within the household, the eldest male is recognized as head of the family, organizing the activities of dependent women and children and governing their behavior. Family resources such as money and land

are controlled by senior men. Men make decisions; women acquiesce. Beyond the family, men are accorded positions of leadership throughout society, and women are summoned to play a supportive and enabling role as marginalized subordinates.

Matriarchy means rule by senior women. In a matriarchal society, women would exercise authority throughout social life and control power and wealth. Like patriarchy, matriarchy is a gender ideology. Unlike patriarchy, however, matriarchy is not embedded in structures and institutions in any culture in the contemporary world. That is to say, it's just an ideology—not a dominant one, and certainly not hegemonic.

While societies with patrilineal kinship systems are strongly patriarchal, societies with matrilineal kinship systems are not matriarchal. This is a common source of confusion. In matrilineal kinship systems, children primarily belong to their mother's kin group, and inheritance passes through the maternal line. However, even in matrilineal societies, leadership is exercised by the senior men of the family as observed by Arifin et al. (2023). Instead of a woman's husband, it is her brother or mother's brother (her maternal uncle) who makes decisions about family resources and disciplines the behavior of family members. Scholars such as Shannon (2019) who theorize the existence of ancient matriarchies suggest that those societies were not only matrilineal but also dominated by the leadership of women as well as the values of fertility and motherhood.

Matriarchy influence in SOPAN choreography.

In this particular choreographic process, it went through a lot of versions! I couldn't find a way to say "women empowering women" that wasn't cheesy until I thought of the idea of matriarchy. Why is the word "patriarchy" so easy on our tongues? Why aren't we talking about our matriarchy? The more we talked about what it means to have your voice heard, the more they realized what women-empowering women really look like. It was highlighting where it was good in their lives but also showed them where it could be better. Consider the similarities between the elements of religion and culture described in this chapter such as the role of symbols and stories in both accounts and the pursuit of life according to what either faith or culture determines to be the higher standards of living.

An important question to ask is whether 'culture' should be necessarily understood as the larger or more

significant category in international relations, always casting 'religion' as a subset within it. Such a view makes sense because no one religion encompasses an entire society in the world today, and no society lives entirely according to one set of sacred rules and practices as noted by Kawangung (2019). On the other hand, in some contexts, religious authority and identity can be more significant than any other cultural element which is stated also by Burhani (2020). This section shows the two separate ideologies in religion and culture, with each aspect focussing on different role of religion in society where it shows certain symbols in the costume and movements connection between the two dancers.

There were a lot of conversations around holding multiple emotions at once. How can we hold the reality of this and also work toward something better? It shows in the three sections of the work. Part one is called "Religion not to Religion" This first part came up when I realize in Malaysia, the culture and religion have been mixed where Malaysia's National Cultural Policy 1971-2021 and current cultural developments have stated that Islam is an important element in the formation of National Culture which has been extensively highlighted by Chin & Tanasaldy, (2019). Theorists have long drawn such links and these are useful for our consideration here. For example, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously described religion as a 'cultural system' composed of myths, rituals, symbols, and beliefs created by humans as a way of giving our individual and collective lives a sense of meaning (Woodhead, 2004). Thus, prior evidence was also recorded where the societal structure was slowly accepting religion and culture as one and the same aspect.

Part two is called "Resilience". This part has shown the symbol of women's power through movement difficulties which have been noted by the entire women's community under different situations as observed by Matharu & Juneja (2021), Huang et al., (2019), and Aniefuna et al. (2020). This part has inspired me from the reality not only in the community commonly practice the *adat perpatih*, but women, in general, in the manner how they raise the kids, do household work, arrange the schedule for the family, and so on. The time is very limited yet they still have the energy to do all in twenty-four hours a day. The Matriarchy vibes are shown throughout the movements of women in accomplishing regular tasks in their lives.

Part three is called "Paradise." This is in reference to the historic Matriarchy prehistory book written by Johann Jakob Bachofen in 1864, women gradually lost their freedom, mystery, and superior position which is studied

by several scholars including Miller (2021). For five thousand years or more, the gynocritic age had flowered in peace and productivity. Slowly, in varying stages and in different parts of the world, the social order was painfully reversed. Women became the underclass, marked by their visible differences in both public as well as private life. The adoption of three stages show when the dancers are holding a hand each other and consistently raising to show that they have finally had freedom. That particular section shows the reference to the *adat perpatih* where the woman has to take charge of wealth in the family after marriage. It is not to show the power, but it shows how freedom is part of the power, where the dancers show their desire and what they want in life as women and are not scared to break the rules, want to be able to walk to the car and not be scared, want to run at night without being judged, want to be able to walk around without getting cat-called or harassed, want to live without fear and so forth.

Choreographic Process in Making SOPAN

This research of looking at the matriarchy as a symbol of power for women, particularly in *Rembau, Negeri Sembilan* has enabled me as a choreographer to adapt and look at the behavior patterns of that particular community who practice this *adat* and then look at the symbols found in their daily activities to be taken as movements ideas in designing SOPAN choreography in accordance with study objectives. In this choreographic research, various factors are studied primarily to investigate the ability of women to perform various forms of movement that may be considered incapable of being performed by them under patriarchal system. Each movement in this SOPAN work has specific symbolisms and metaphors that show what is regarded as a negative to a positive form.

The choreographer, while developing the methods used in creating this piece, has used Schechner's Workshop-rehearsal/performance model as earlier utilized by Zahid & Anizaim (2022). The specification of each phrase is interconnected with each other on societal issues, which include cultures, religions, gaze, and gender perspectives. This choreography process will also introduce a different meaning of each phrase and movement from the standpoint of Speech Acts Theory coined by Austin et al. (1969) based on the different situations. Using Speech Act Theory has helped the choreographer and audience to understand each part of the performance especially when it relates to metaphor or symbolism. As Austin and later Jacque Derrida mentioned, the meaning in

every movement can be interpreted differently from what is being seen, felt, and observed. This is because, as pointed out by (Episcopus, 1644), there is always GAP, which provides a separator between two opinions and observations. This often happens to the choreography, which leads to the abstract structure, refer to Figure 1. Workshop rehearsal/performance model by Schechner, 2013.

A performance model is a tool for analysing the various levels of interaction in the choreographic making and interconnection between metaphors and symbolic and actual meaning, which are later translated into movements Sun et al. (2020). Schechner's performance model has organized a format for collaboratively exploring new and different possibilities in one dance performance that inform and define the content and structure of subsequent performances. A performative task is an organizational unit for planning group activities manifest in shared performances. It can refer to tasks such as repetitive activities to an outcome towards the exercise given to the performer during a process and introduce a framework for analysing and proactively organizing work and activities throughout a method of making choreography (Hansen, 2022). Schechner's also explained the possibility explained in the "performance model" and the ideology of "as if," "what could work," and "what we have got" (Schechner, 2013). This model also will give a different perspective on highlighting women's functionality inside society in creating choreography from a different point of view which has not been present in patriarchal societies.

The ideology of using two female dancers to represent women's power will be implemented in the current project. Even if we look at Malaysia, for the first time in 2018, Dr Wan Azizah has become the first woman Deputy Prime Minister. It has brought back the history of the late Che Siti Wan Kembang (1610–1667), a legendary queen who reigned over a region on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, now located within the Malaysian state of Kelantan. She was known as a warrior queen and engaged in battle on horseback with a sword accompanied by an army of female horse-riders. It was said that she and her adopted daughter *Puteri Saadong* possessed mystical powers which also finds evidence in academic literature in the work of Stark et al. (2022). Those figures have become a strong symbol in creating SOPAN. The Power and the amount of energy have been portrayed in the movements to emphasize the difference between alpha and gamma, which will include the great difficulties of lifting and technique. This work's difficulty level was proven when this piece was announced as a winner of the

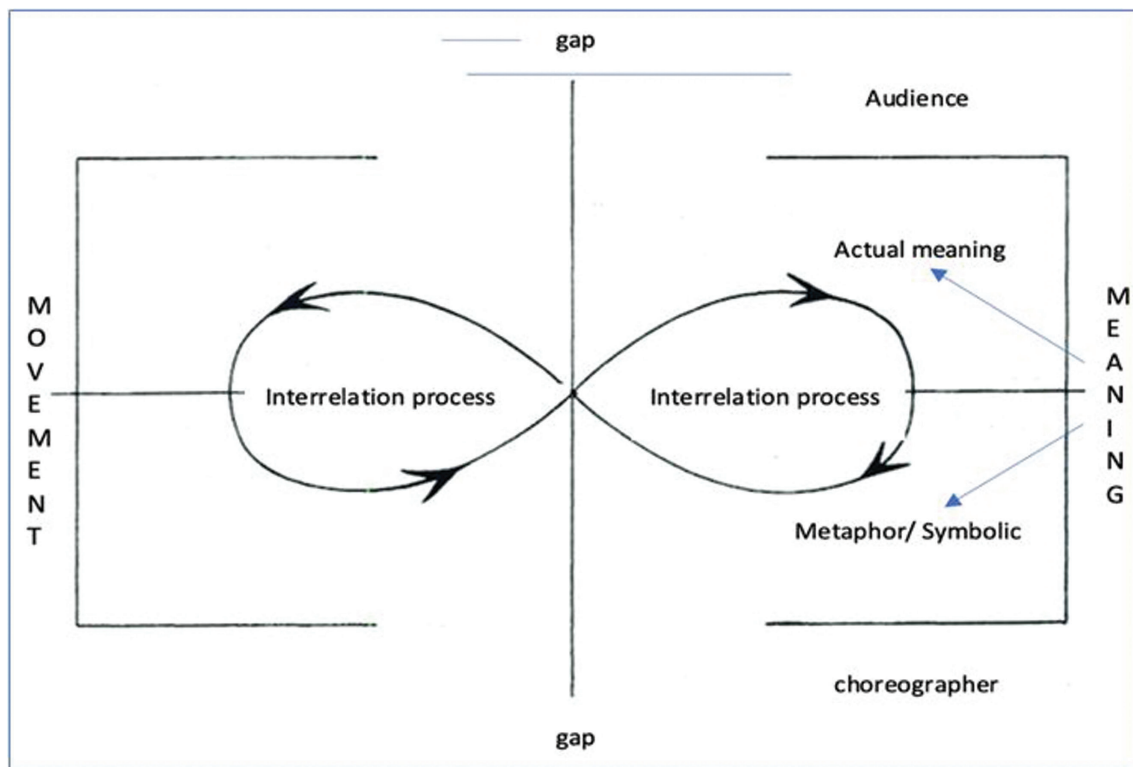


Figure 1. Workshop-rehearsal/performance model
Source: Schechner, 2013

MASDANZA⁵ Award at the YOKOHAMA Dance Collection⁶ 2022. The judges mentioned, that “this award goes to Fairul Zahid (LASALLE Dance) because the choreography has portrayed a very clear message based on the synopsis given, and the dancers deliver it together with a strong technique. The level of maturity of the dancers has made the choreography stronger. The woman issue has been covered excellently in this choreography. With that, MASADANZA has awarded this prize to Fairul Zahid (LASALLE Dance).”

The gap between different viewers

In producing SOPAN, the analysis has been done from three different perspectives; the first one is to position me as a woman, in which I need to feel and know what

⁵Founded in 1996 by dancer and choreographer Natalia Medina, MASDANZA holds since 2019 the EFFE Quality Label from the European Festivals Association, an initiative of the European Union, and has been nominated for the Best European Dance Festival Award.

⁶Yokohama Dance Collection is the annual contemporary choreography dance festival at Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse Number 1. Japan. This December marks the 28th year since its start in 1996 as a Japanese domestic platform for a global choreography and dance competition. In addition to sending roughly 500 established choreographers out into the world through its competitions, YDC consists of various programs such as performances by recent award winners, new works by internationally established choreographers, and collaborative programs with overseas dance festivals.

is necessary and what is desired for each woman herself. In this process, it is not enough to see with the naked eye without fully immersing in the feeling. Apart from that, interviews with some communities living in Negeri Sembilan who practice this “*Adat Papatih*” is done to get more knowledge regarding woman’s perspectives and offer broader perspectives. Second, assigned as an audience seat, I need to know how effectively the audience can acknowledge that this work is portraying the ideology of women’s empowerment instead of sex symbols that is against religion.

The last one is to put me as a choreographer. This includes my approach and observation through perspective gaze and gender bias. Referring to Figure 1, Workshop-rehearsal/performance model by Schechner, 2013 above, there are two main points in understanding the true meaning of each issue found in this work. For example, the title of this work is *SOPAN*. If it is placed in the audience’s view, they will expect this piece will portray the modesty of women and the softness of women; however, the presence of the costume itself has already made it astray and against the chosen title. This is what I said earlier; everything found in this *SOPAN* work has an implicit meaning. The perspective and understanding of the audience who watches this piece can be different from the intention of the choreographer when creating this piece. It will always have a gap (Episcopius, 1644).

This Gap will always appear between two eyes, as referred to in Figure 1.

This is because, as pointed out by (Episcopius, 1644), there is always a gap, which provides a separator between two opinions and observations. This often happens in the choreography, which leads to the abstract structure of the dance performance. Therefore, it is very likely that the audience and choreographer's acceptance are different according to the theory of the "Gap" approach by Vedic (1987) written by Anna Bonshek in her book "Transformation Within the Gap: Liminality and Principles of Vedic Language Theory in Performance" (Bonshek, 2000). Anna states that everything done between the performer and the audience has a different meaning and delivery. It is divided into two parts based on imagination and understanding the audience has created based on their experiences throughout life or at that time. Every piece of information received through what is seen will be processed by the mind and, in return, give birth to the imagination and a storyline that may be different from what the performer is trying to convey.

Creating specific movements, particularly in this performance piece, communicates an idea or intention to the audience; the movement vocabulary provides a major tool for the choreographer's artistic expression through the arisen issues. The ideology behind this creation is to show women's empowerment through dance using societal issues. Of course, from the audience's perspective and gaze, it is mostly about entertainment. Most of the audience tends to see and feel direct translation. For example, dancer A oppresses dancer B; for the audience, it needs to show the symbol of oppression. In *SOPAN*, most of the deliberation is through precise movements from beginning to end. It is very hard to identify the narrative in this piece; however, it is full of the message to be delivered.

People generally recognize dance as a bodily practice centered on establishing an innate and intelligent corporeal understanding of oneself, movement potentials, and bodily techniques. Regardless of the academic, professional, or recreational purpose behind the dance, dance is considered a physical practice that lends to the habituation and training of the body. Through this conditioning, choreographers pass along a great deal of information to dancers, peers, and audiences. For several decades, understanding the relationship between movements and meaning has been addressed and theorized from various perspectives and experiences. Scholars have addressed topics including the dancing body and limited participation in dance choreography (Gard,

2006; Burt, 2007; Risner, 2008); how the intersection of text, religion, gender, semiotics, and culture can be part of the tools in making choreography. The role of the intersection will be a necessary aspect to be considered. It will give an idea to the choreographer to start thinking about what and where to start.

The Semiotics theories in creating SOPAN Movements

Semiotics, or semiology, is a branch of linguistics that studies signs and symbols and their interpretation in communication (Peirce, 1931-1958). According to Peirce, a sign is anything that represents something else to someone in some capacity; it consists of three components: 1. the sign itself or signifier; 2. its representation (the signified meaning); and 3. an interpretant - which provides interpretation from this sign. Semiotics offers an insightful framework to investigate the role of spoken word interventions in contemporary choreography, helping us comprehend how language and movement are employed to convey meaning and communicate ideas.

Semiotics has been applied in making this contemporary choreography by considering signifier and signified concepts. In making this contemporary choreography (*SOPAN*), the signifier is the word that I play which is *SOPAN* while the signified is the movement where the word *SOPAN* itself has created an image in the dancers' brain. Throughout the teaching, I have given the ideology and knowledge to the dancers on what is *SOPAN* in the Malays' perspective. This has made the dancers aware of those words. During the process of creation, dancers often ask "Where is *SOPAN* in this particular movement?" As a result, I gave them an ideology of *SOPAN* as a symbol of culture and religion believe where it is common to all human beings in this world. It represents "being polite" or "being respectful" to the elderly and so on. However, in this particular choreography, it represents showing the other side of women who can do some of the men's work through the movement's vocabulary. The intricacy and difficult level of movements that I gave are representatives of what women can do. However yet, it still has a gap.

Another concept from the field of semiotics that applies to the research on making this contemporary choreography is iconicity. An icon, as defined by Peirce (1931-1958), is a sign analogous to what it represents in a specific way. Modern choreography can implement this idea to establish linkages between expression and

physical movement. For instance, a choreographer might use words throughout the process to describe an action or emotion and then employ movement representing that action or emotion as an effective link between the two. It can be as simple as bending the upper torso (head to waist) 45° and straight one arm to point on the floor and the five fingers pointed 45° on the floor as a symbol of respect if we want to walk or pass by the elderly. This particular movement has shown the strong symbol not only as women but in Malay culture in general where we have been taught since childhood to practice it. Another sample of movements that are related to a sign is pointing five fingers 180° in different directions which shows a symbol of “we practice our religion and beliefs” where we pray five times a day, refer to Figure 2. Those gestures have been used repetitively throughout the dance. It is also a significant gesture where humans “cannot judge others by its cover”.

The Symbolism of *berkemban* in creating SOPAN

The costume of *berkemban*, which involves wearing a cloth named Sarong, which is tied around the chest and untied to the calf, became the starting point for the development of clothing in the Malay world. *Berkemban* is a synonymy by Malay Women as they wear it daily at home and still practicing today, especially when taking a bath (Rusli et al., 2022). *Berkemban's* historical origins are from the Peranakans and the Influence of their maternal forebears from Java, Sumatra, Malaya, Siam, and Bali. The Nyonyas liked to wear *berkemban* in the privacy of their homes. Probably the only Chinese women who do so. Some senior nyonyas and aunts still like to wear *berkemban* for informal wear today - cool, comfy, and nifty with no buttons or zips. But it's not popular with younger Nyonyas who prefer housecoats,

kimonos, bathrobes, or just a towel. Another style of *sarong* is by tying it around the waist. The length of the *sarong* fabric is long enough to reach the ankle (Septiarini et al., 2022). In this way, you can see an example of Cik Siti Wan Kembang's elegant dress, which consists of *kemban*, *sarong* fabric, and a long scarf, plus jewelry such as *dokoh*, bracelets, and pendants. Advent to the Islamic revolution in the 1970s, women were ordered to wear a *sarong* over the *kemban* to cover the exposed head and shoulders. The Sultan of Kelantan also announced to any woman who went out without a head covering that they would be punished by smearing black paint on their body theory of sign and face (Ismail, 2011). This also indicates the government's concern about implementing Islamic law in the Malay community.

In context, the meaning behind each costume can be read differently depending on Austin's writing and perspective in the book “*How To Do Things With Words*,” He mentioned it always has a different meaning in every single word or text. If we look at the word SOPAN from the audience, they will say or interpret “*wahh.. so sopan...*”, or it can be “*mana sopannya?*” (where is the polite?). However, for me, the interplay of the word SOPAN in this piece is to show that even though they are wearing what we call Malay *berkemban* yet, they are still protective of their pride. In the olden days, all Malays women would take a bath at the river together with all women; however, even though there were only women, they still took baths with *berkemban*. The concept of *berkemban* is to show that, as a woman, it is not necessary to be judged as a sex symbol even if they are wearing sexy cloth such as *berkemban*. This is what I referred to as *kiasan* (figurative); the intention is more likely to show what needs to show without intention; it is more like a constative instead of performative; however,



Figure 2. Costume of SOPAN performed by Jazlyn Tan Jia Yu, and Elyana bt Hamlan
Source: Sugawara Kota

it carries a strong statement behind it. Based on Figure 3, the costume has shown the actual process and style of wearing the costume in *berkemban*; however, it has been modified and changed during the YOKOHAMA Dance Collection Competition 2022.

Another example, there at the beginning of the dance piece is when one dancer stands and one dancer sits on her leg. These particular movements and positions show the different levels in the Minang community (Fanany & Fanany, 2020), and the dancers wear what we call a *hijab*. A hijab is a head-covering scarf that some Muslim women

wear in public. For many such women, the hijab signifies modesty and privacy (see Figure 4). The significance of this hijab in this contemporary choreography is to show that women still have honor, pride, and modesty (Mohamad & Hassim, 2021). The symbol of this hijab appears for at least one and a half minutes with slow, and soft movements as a representation of women in what community and religion expected them to be. However, towards the end, the dancers have opened the *kemban*, but facing the opposite direction from the audience to show a symbol of freedom while still protecting their honor and pride. Refer to Figure 4.

To some extent, the ideology of *berkemban* in this work gives room for the choreographer to see from the perspective of gaze and gender. This is because, as stated at the beginning, in producing this work, the choreographer looks at the performance from different perspectives, including as an audience. If placed from a man's glasses, the view and meaning of his gaze must be different, (Fischer-Lichte, 1997). Therefore, it will have a different meaning. Nevertheless, if put from a woman's glass angle, it may be seen as an emphasis on all women having rights and desires. This probability was emphasized when producing this work. The message needs to be in line with the needs of the situation. As mentioned by John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* (2008), two eyes may interpret it differently based on desire and interpersonal thoughts. However, as mentioned earlier, the intention of using such a costume is to ensure it reflects the concept of semiotics (Saussure, 2011).



Figure 3. New approach to styling *berkemban* by SOPAN dancer, Natasha Koo
Source: Author

Conclusion

This practice as research methodology in producing a SOPAN choreography provides an ideology and approach



Figure 4. Symbol of honor
Source: Author

to raising the rights and causes of women's power in a community. Women are capable as men and should be treated equally. No doubt, their ability, and power are something to look at. The context of creating SOPAN not only offers symbolic stories in various aspects but also gives a new breath in showing the strength of women in a community, whether in Malaysia or other countries. The opposing view of women as sex symbols can be seen from different aspects and strengthened it for women. On whether matriarchy is less violent than patriarchy, the argument is explainable by examining history in the past centuries compared to today's modern world. Due to laws such as the Violence Against Women Act, domestic violence has not only been reduced, but the world has witnessed men embracing equal treatment of the female sex. This shows reduced violence against women and, thus, a less belligerent society. At the same time, evidence-based in today's society shows that matriarchy can be less violent than patriarchy. The reason for this is based on the lack of wars, whereby the world has not experienced any war since the end of World War II in 1945. Nonetheless, although a gender-favoring community is fine and acceptable, gender centrism is not tolerable. Although patriarchy is more violent, it would be a mistake to replace it with matriarchy. This is because some women can still influence violence. Violence is more of human nature rather than a sex issue; thereby, belligerence is not reliant on either matriarchy or patriarchy.

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Work Sample

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dowzaqQO4>

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Fairul has produced several full-length and mix-bills performances for tours in Beijing, Los Angeles, New York, Jakarta, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Chicago. He is a prolific and versatile choreographer/dancer working in the disciplines of contemporary ballet, Malay dance, Chinese classical dance, Indian classical dance, and jazz.

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Fairul is currently pursuing his PhD focusing on practice as research and he is one of the young emerging scholars based in Singapore and Malaysia

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