

# From Monuments to Movements: Curating an Artistic Re-imagination of Kedah Tua

Nur Hilyati Ramli\*, Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Pravina Manoharan

School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA

\*Corresponding author: hilyati84@gmail.com

Published online: 25 January 2019

To cite this article: Nur Hilyati Ramli, Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Pravina Manoharan. 2019. From monuments to movements: Curating an artistic re-imagination of Kedah Tua. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 18(Supp. 1): 19–25. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2019.18.Supp.1.3>.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2019.18.Supp.1.3>

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a performative reflection of the archaeological discoveries from Kedah Tua's early civilisation envisioned through the site-specific theatrical project entitled "Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua". Different elements from archaeological excavations were selected and adapted into a performance project by way of the curation of theatrical movements. The interpretation of the archaeological findings is translated using specific elements from the study of performing arts such as movement, space, and time to help simplify the dissemination of an otherwise complex knowledge of historical data. The movements choreographed for the different dance scenes and overall performance are based on the archaeological findings of metal, monuments, and an industrialised civilisation. Recent interest in performing arts as a reflection of the archaeological discoveries can be seen as an attempt to broaden the scope of archaeology as a discipline to encompass the totality of the human experience. This collaborative work between the field of archaeology and performance presents choreographers with interesting approaches in exploring notions concerning the performing arts.*

**Keywords:** *monuments, movements, archaeological discoveries*

## INTRODUCTION

"When we create a performance we go to the communities and analyze the folkloric traditions with the eyes of an archaeologists, ethnographer etc. For the rituals and dances that no longer exist, we construct them using archaeological artefacts...". (Reyes 2008)

The statement above by Rudolf Reyes defines the approach choreographers took by using archaeological artefacts and architectural remains to reconstruct dance and ritual movements of the once glorified Maya civilisation for the present day. This paper addresses a similar approach mentioned by Reyes in dealing with the choreographic framework for the production of *"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua"*. It is an attempt to depict the ancient kingdom and civilisation of Kedah Tua through performance. The article explores the creative process of choreography as depicted in the various dance movements. Rudolfo Reyes suggests when attempting to recreate performative elements of the past, the choreography of the performance is not the sole responsibility of the choreographer but instead, a collaborative engagement where directors, choreographers, archaeologist, ethnologist, and folklorist come together to creatively bring to life practices of an ancient civilisation. When attempting to reimage and recreate age-old performances, archaeological artefacts and monuments should not be treated as mere historical objects instead, they should be regarded as a vessel that presents a valuable insight into the past.

Lipe (1984) aptly states, artefacts and their context play a universal role in providing cultural continuity and perspective as they link the past to the present and future. Similarly, in Lembah Bujang, the various archaeological artefacts presented in the form of monuments built from clay bricks, pottery shards, knives, beads, and Buddhist stone table with Sanskrit inscription dating as far back as the 5th CE offer an extremely valuable insight into Kedah Tua's early civilisation. The various archaeological evidences at Lembah Bujang, literary sources, historical narratives and interviews with the local people presented the researchers of this

project with a fitting opportunity to re-create and curate an artistic visualisation of Kedah Tua through dance and the arrangement of defined movements. The arrangement of pure movements and patterned movements for the dances in this production are composed through a deep understanding of the archaeological discoveries, mapping of the excavated sites and the dramatic text or script.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AS INSPIRATION FOR CHOREOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK

The various artistic impressions envisioned in paintings and archaeological excavations depicted scenes of a bustling maritime trade civilisation, one that links the Malay Peninsular with the world of regional trade. Based on these literary findings, the framework for the choreography was developed in an attempt to reconstruct past narratives of Kedah Tua. According to Zolkurnian Hassan, Chia and Hamid Isa (2010), geophysical surveys and geological drillings done at the site suggested that the nearby ancient river was approximately 100 m wide, thus validating claims of the possibilities of huge vessels docking to verify early maritime trade industry between the locals and neighbouring countries. In addition, geophysical surveys also reveal discoveries of four jetties that were unearthed believed to be dated from 1st CE grounding the above-mentioned claims about the maritime trade between Kedah Tua and other countries.

These findings presented a basis for the first choreographic idea developed for the prologue scene, which opened with traders exchanging goods with each other. A combination of movement qualities such as loco and non-locomotive movements that comprise swinging, suspension, collapse, and vibration were utilised to portray the bustling scene at the harbour. The activities such as docking of the vessels, loading and unloading of cargo, and interaction with the different traders were all presented using the body as the sole medium.

Another vital archaeological discovery at Kedah Tua is the excavation of a unique ritual site believed to be used for worship purposes by the local communities over a long period of time. According to Mokhtar Saidin, the director of Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia (CGAR USM), Sungai Batu is believed to be the oldest site unearthed in Southeast Asia (Mokhtar Saidin, Jaffery Abdullah, Abdul Jalil Osman, and Azman Abdullah 2011). Excavations showed that a ritualistic monument at site SB1B, was built of clay bricks with geometrical precision. The unique structure of the square base and circle on the top suggests it could be associated with animism, Hinduism or Buddhism. According to Zolkurnian Hassan, Chia and Hamid Isa (2010), the structure of the monument suggests a cosmological connection with elements of the sun, moon and earth, deeply connected to all three above mentioned religious and worship practices (Photo 1).



**Photo 1** Picture of the original artefact of the ritual monument.  
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The following scene in the production is a ritualistic dance intended to be performed around this particular ritual monument (SBIB). A similar looking ritualistic monument (Photo 2) was re-created for the performance by the designer and the scenographer to resemble the original structure. The choreography for this scene explored the movements of ritualistic practices associated with Hinduism and animism. A note-worthy point to acknowledge is how both the choreographic movements of the dancers blended with the re-constructed ritual monuments, which in turn created a scenario that attempted resemble the ritual practice of Kedah Tua.



**Photo 2** Dancers performing the act of worship around the constructed ritual monument.

Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.



**Photo 3** Dancers performing a manifestation of the Sun God.

Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The entire dance for the worship scene was segmented into three parts to present worship practices in a chronological yet artistic manner. The scene opens with the dancers entering the stage while offering flowers, water, and light. These three elements symbolically represent the five elements of nature popularly referred to as *pancha bhutam* (earth, water, fire, air, and ether) in Hinduism. The first part sees the monument being lighted by the dancers using candles to mark the beginning of a new auspicious day. The second part continues with the dancers circling the monument and at the same time performing acts of adoration such as offering flower petals and sprinkling water. Water and flowers are often used during worship as a mark of cleansing. The act of dancing in a circle attests a close relationship between human beings and mother earth as the latter does not stop but continues to orbit around the sun and provide for her inhabitants. Flowers and water resemble the spiritual cleansing act. The third part sees the dance coming to an end with the dancers performing a manifestation of the Sun God theatrically in a static pose in front of the monument, built facing towards Mount Jerai, believed to be the sacred home of the Gods (Photo 3). All these carefully selected dramatised movements and gestures in this ritual dance accentuate a deep connection between these renowned worship practices and Kedah Tua.

Apart from the archaeological discoveries, the script too becomes a referral point for the choreographic framework. The flow of the dance scenes is congruent to the scenario depicted by each scene as in the dramatic script. According to the script, Kedah Tua was ruled by a wise king by the name of Maharaja Derbar Raja. Under his rule, the kingdom flourished into a highly industrialised civilisation focusing on maritime trade and the precious raw material; iron and iron smelting technology. In order to expand the economic trade in metallurgy and the mining of the iron ore, the king formulates a marriage proposal between his lovely daughter and the prince from Parsi. To celebrate this reunion of two young hearts which ultimately binds two kingdoms, the choreographer constructs a dance using fans and pleats attached to the dancer's skirts to be performed at the royal courts personifying the grandeur and flourishing kingdom, welcoming the foreign prince and to applaud the royal engagement of two hearts and two kingdoms.

The next scene is the pinnacle of the ancient kingdom, the metallurgy site. The scene of the "forging of the iron" is inspired by the fact that there were discoveries of remnants of advanced iron smelting facilities and equipment's from 4807 BC together with furnaces as well as iron making *tuyeres* and iron slags. Literary works and narratives from other countries in the world which described Kedah Tua as an important place in trading, confirms the existence of the metallurgy industry in this ancient civilisation. Below are among some of the most acclaimed literary and relevant works that were resourceful for the researchers and curators of this production:

1. Tamil literary works, the *Pattinapalai* poem (200 BCE – 200 CE) and the Tamil Epic *Parunkhatai* (10th CE) mention iron from Lembah Bujang and Kedah as *Khataha* and *Khataram*, Sanskrit words for iron and black seeds (Nilakanta Sastri 1938; Thani Nayagam 1968).
2. A Chinese traveler, I-Ching has recorded Kedah or *Chieh-cha* during 2nd CE as a centre for trade and comers (Wheatley 1961).
3. The mention of *Kalah*, iron swords in Arabic from *Kalah* (Kedah) in the Arabic sources of Al-Khindi and Al-Biruni (638 CE).

The dancers in the metal dance were all young men expressing hard and rough labour but at the same time exalting in the success of the metal industry. Portrait movements of the dancers dramatising metal labourers, sweat, heat and the process of iron smelting are crafted to synchronise with the sounds of metal and iron smelting produced by the music soundscape. Followed by the "smelting and forging of iron" dance arrangements, martial arts movements, mainly using swords and acrobatics was choreographed to put forward the idea that the technology of producing weapons especially the most sought after *Qalah/Kalah* swords already existed (Photo 4). The entire scene is interpreted through the narrative stylised acting and story-telling manner to show the prominence of iron in Kedah Tua and how it had attracted people from all over the world.

The masculine nature of the metal dance is then juxtaposed with the romantic dance of love between Princess Cempaka and Prince Adar. Both the lovers express their affection towards each other in this dance charged with passion and emotions. Their bodies are closely bound to show their yearning towards one another. Prince Adar as the suitor woos the princess through his charms and presenting her with a beautiful bangle as a gift. The princess, who is charmed, accepts his love and the bangle and dance together in each other's arms until they are interrupted rudely by the evil Princess Mawar.



**Photo 4** A scene depicting the actor demonstrating the moves using the *Qalah* sword.

Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The final dance is at the funeral scene of Maharaja Darbar Raja (Photo 5). The king is poisoned by his own evil brother-in-law who plots to rule the kingdom and the metallurgy industry. The mood of this dance is sombre and dancers comprising both of male and female perform gestures and acts related to funeral rites such as the procession of the royal body, circling around the ritualistic monument and cremation rites. Once again, the movements were carefully chosen for this choreography reflecting a combination of animistic beliefs and Hinduism. The use of a long white cloth represents pureness of the deceased and much loved royal character. The dancers and movers perform the funeral rites around the ritualistic monument to give an emphasis to the symbolic monument as the centre of the universe.



**Photo 5** Tsunami scene.

Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The funeral scene coincides with the tsunami scene. Constructed movements was developed using the dancers' bodies and the white cloth to create the picture of a disastrous tsunami (Photo 5). Historically, it was believed that tsunami hit and wiped out this ancient kingdom. The dancers use their bodies and the white cloth to symbolically show the intimidating movements of the huge waves gushing and swallowing everything and everyone that come into its way. The production ends with the tsunami taking all evil away with it and leaving the place for a re-birth.

## FROM MONUMENT TO MOVEMENTS

Khatchadourian (1978) states that dancing, performing a dance, consists in certain human activities and generally indulged by human beings. Dance activities can be categorised as patterns of movement; either pure movement or movement representing certain imagined actions reflecting or personifying characters, imaginary situations and so on, made by parts or the whole of the human body by creating dynamic visual or auditory forms. These patterned movements can be created from different types of resources and through shifting a person's body parts from one position to another. When different movements are merged, it becomes a sequence. Sequences executed in a repetitive fashion turns to form a choreography or dance movement.

There are four stages during the creation of the dance movements in this choreography. They are as follows:

1. Finding a starting point.
2. Creating movements from stimulus.
3. Using the stimulus to make a motif.
4. Repeat, varied and develop the motif to form a choreography.

Finding the starting point means trying to extract ideas from different stimuli. For example, newspaper articles, photographs, extract of a piece of text from a play or book, extract from a poem, a piece of music, and a sculpture or from a well-known quote. Keywords from the stimuli are then used to stimulate a theme and idea such as revolution, surrender, and more. From the keywords (stimulus), another four different aspects been used to give the movements variations such as action, space, dynamic, and relation. In this case, the starting point for the choreography was the archaeological discoveries such as the sites, the pictures of the excavated sites in the books, and other historical and literary narratives.

The next step is using the stimulus to make a motif. A motif is a pattern of movements that are linked together and should be visually seen several times repeated in the choreography. Repeated movements in the same order are then varied by using the elements of dance such as speed, level, direction, and dynamics. The choreography then was developed by choreographic elements such as addition, deletion, substitution, repetition, reverse, and stillness. The level of manipulation of the movements for the choreography should not change from the main ideas. "*Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua*" applied all these choreographic principles and dance elements to produce a choreographic framework from monuments to movements that supported the story line of the script and re-lived the scenes of the once glorified ancient civilisation based on archaeological discoveries and architectural remains at Kedah Tua.

## CONCLUSION

The collaborative efforts between archaeology and performing arts in this production revealed how monuments and historical artefacts of the past can be brought to live through performance narratives. The various choreographic movements were carefully shaped to ensure they reflected the narratives of Kedah Tua. This template of collaboration should be continued and further explored to ensure the sustainability of knowledge with regards to history, historical references, and ancient civilisations for the future understanding of the contemporary people.

## NOTES

1. SB1B is the acronym given to the site at Sungai Batu. It is a unique monument built from clay bricks. The base of the monument is round and there is a square middle erected on the base. It is believed to be similar looking to an animistic-Hindu-Buddha ritual monument (Nadarajan 2012).
2. *Tuyere* is a type of air-blower used in iron smelting industry. It is made from clay.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, J. S. 1988. Trade, transportation and tributaries: Exchange, agriculture and settlement distribution in early historic-period Kedah, Malaysia. PhD diss., University of Hawaii.
- Lipe, W. D. 1984. Value and meaning in cultural resources. In *Approaches to the archaeological heritage. A comparative study of world cultural resource management systems*, ed. H. Cleere, 1–11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lopez, A. R. 1997. *Re-constructing and re-presenting dance: Exploring dance and archeology*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Mokhtar, S., Jaffery, A., Abdul Jalil, O. and Azman, A. 2011. Issues and problems of previous studies in the Bujang Valley and the discovery of Sungai Batu. In *Bujang Valley and early civilizations in Southeast Asia*, eds. S. Chia and B. Watson Andaya, 16–26. Kuala Lumpur: Department of National Heritage, Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture.
- Nadarajan, V. 2012. *Bujang Valley: The wonder that was ancient Kedah*. Selangor, Malaysia: Kuan Press.
- Nilakanta Sastri, K. A. A. 1938. The beginnings of intercourse between India and China. *Indian Historical Quarterly* 14: 380–387.
- Reyes, R. 2008. *Conversation: Ancient Maya dance; Using archaeology to re-construct lost rituals*. <https://archive.archaeology.org/0805/etc/conversation.html> (accessed 6 April 2018).
- Thani Nayagam, X. S. 1968. The identification of Kataram. Proceedings of the First International Conference Seminar on Tamil Studies. *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10(2): 358–360.
- Wheatley, P. 1961. *The golden Khersonese*. Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press.
- Zolkurnian, H., Chia, S. and Hamid, M. I. 2011. Survey and excavation of an ancient monument in Sungai Batu, Bujang Valley, Kedah, Malaysia. In *Bujang Valley and early civilizations in Southeast Asia*, eds. S. Chia and B. Watson Andaya, 40–41. Kuala Lumpur: Department of National Heritage, Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture.