

Community-Centric Dynamics: The Interplay of Dancers, Musicians, and Audience in Main Zapin Performances

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Abstract

This article examines the intricate interactions among dancers, musicians, and audience members within Main Zapin, a traditional Malay dance practice in Johor. The study addresses three primary research questions: (a) How do performers navigate their multifaceted roles within Main Zapin, transitioning fluidly between dancer, musician, and active participant? (b) What are the key relational dynamics between dancers, musicians, and audience members in Main Zapin? (c) How do these interactions shape the overall performance experience? Main Zapin is characterized by its spontaneity and improvisational elements, involving complex interactions among dancers, musicians, and the audience. The findings reveal that *pemain zapin* (Zapin performers) embody multiple roles as dancers, musicians, and active participants, seamlessly transitioning between these functions. This versatility enables performers to engage deeply with each other, actively shaping the performance through personal expression and interaction. This study offers a novel exploration of the fluid roles of performers in Main Zapin, providing new insights into the relational dynamics that sustain this living tradition. These findings contribute significantly to the cultural preservation and revitalization of Main Zapin, highlighting its unique integration of spontaneity, community engagement, and performer versatility. Fieldwork conducted in Muar, Johor, documents the practices of Main Zapin performers, providing an emic perspective that deepens the understanding of Malay dance culture and offers insights beyond Western-centric paradigms. This study highlights the importance of these interactions for community engagement and the sustainability of the tradition in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *Main Zapin*, Malay Dance Culture, *Pemain Zapin*, Performer Interactions.

Introduction

Main Zapin is a traditional Malay dance that has been practiced in Johor for generations, embodying the rich cultural heritage and social practices of the Malay community. This dance form is characterized by its spontaneity, improvisational nature, and the integral relationship between the dancer and musician, who often assume interchangeable roles during the performance. Main Zapin performances are often community-centric, involving direct interaction with the audience, which influences the dynamic nature of the dance. In Main Zapin, the boundaries between performers and the audience are intentionally blurred. This study examines how active participants, through their engagement and interaction, are integral to the performance and can be considered performers in their own right.

This research aims to explore the complex performative interactions within Main Zapin and their impact on the overall dance experience. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do performers navigate their multifaceted roles within Main Zapin, transitioning fluidly between dancer, musician, and active participant?
2. What are the key relational dynamics between dancers, musicians, and audience members in Main Zapin?
3. How do these interactions shape the overall performance experience?

This study addresses a critical gap in the recognition of Main Zapin's cultural significance, which has been overshadowed by more formalized performance-based dances in academic discourse and public perception. By employing an emic perspective, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Malay dance culture and its elements through the lens of the performers themselves. This perspective emphasizes the lived experiences and insights of the performers, fostering a more authentic and nuanced comprehension of Main Zapin. The outcomes of this research will enhance our understanding of the social dynamics and cultural relevance of Main Zapin, potentially influencing how traditional dance forms are studied, taught, and preserved in the future.

Background of the Study

Zapin traces its roots back to the 14th century, introduced by Arab traders and missionaries from Hadhramaut (present-day Yemen) to the Malay Archipelago (Nor, 1993). Initially, the dance served as a medium for Islamic teachings but gradually assimilated into the local culture, evolving into what is known today as Zapin Melayu (Malay Zapin). 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) (Nor, 2021). The term "Zapin" is derived from the Arabic word "zafn," which signifies foot movements synchronized to the rhythm of music, highlighting the dance's intricate and rhythmic footwork (Nor, 1993). The introduction and spread of Zapin across the Malay world were facilitated by Hadhrami merchants who settled in the region. Over time, Zapin integrated elements of Malay culture, resulting in a unique syncretic art form that combined Malay-Arab-Islamic influences (Nor, 2004 & 2012). This blend is evident in the dance movements, musical accompaniments, and performance settings. Zapin quickly became an essential part of the Malay cultural heritage in Malaysia, particularly in Johor, where it is deeply entrenched in the local traditions.

In traditional Zapin practices, Main Zapin is not just a dance but an interactive and engaging activity known as "Main," akin to playing a game. When one performs Main Zapin, it is synonymous with "playing" or "Main" the Zapin, with the dancer referred to as a "*Pemain Zapin*" and the entire occasion termed "*Permainan Zapin*" (Hamza, 2023, p. 2). Central to Main Zapin is its improvisational essence and the intricate exchange of "call and response" among dancers. This lively interaction cultivates spontaneity and creativity, setting Main Zapin apart from more structured dance forms. The inclusive nature of Main Zapin events transforms them into social gatherings meant for everyone present to actively participate, blurring the boundaries between performers and audience members (Hamza, 2023, pp. 1-2). Main Zapin events are typically held in village settings during the evening, often in front of the hosts' residences. This environment enhances the communal and interactive ambiance of the performances, fostering a collective experience that strengthens community ties and cultural bonds. Embracing

the playful and interactive aspects of Main Zapin allows both participants and onlookers to engage in a cultural tradition that honours spontaneity, creativity, and social unity within the Malaysian context.

Permainan Zapin, or Main Zapin, is dance form that integrates dance and music into a cohesive cultural practice. It is built on three core elements: *Main Langkah*, which involves the playful manipulation of movement motifs; *Main Lagu*, which focuses on the exploration of musical elements; and *Main Isyarat*, a system of cues for communication among performers. This dance form is inclusive, accommodating participants of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. It is adaptable to various contexts and possibilities, making it a versatile cultural practice. Main Zapin features a flexible structure, not confined to a fixed performance framework. Effective communication within the performance relies on Main Isyarat, comprising verbal codes, eye contact, gestures, and physical touch, facilitating seamless coordination and interaction among dancers and musicians. The dance is dynamic, combining structured choreography with spontaneous movements, highlighting the interplay between ‘chance’—the element of spontaneity and creativity—and ‘design’—the adherence to preordained movement conventions and sequences. This creates a dance that is both orderly and chaotic, predictable and unexpected, traditional and innovative.

Main Zapin holds considerable cultural significance within the Malay community. The improvisational nature of the dance, known as ‘Main’ or ‘Permainan’ allows performers to interact directly with the audience, creating a dynamic and participatory performance environment. The evolution of Zapin into a “national dance form” (Nor, 1993) involved significant changes in its context and structure, transforming it into what is known today as Tarian Zapin (Zapin Dance). Initially a flexible and participatory village dance performed in a playful manner, Zapin has become a stylized and rigidly structured performance suitable for national and international stages. Main Zapin represents the genre’s “first existence,” characterized by its spontaneous and interactive nature, where performers deeply engage with all elements of the dance event. In contrast, Tarian Zapin, the genre’s “second existence,” involves performers focusing primarily on their choreography, with limited interaction with other elements.¹ This distinction highlights the shift from a communal and interactive form of expression to a more formal and performance-oriented practice.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the complex web of interactions and relationships that influence Zapin performers in Johor. Main Zapin, is characterized by its dynamic and participatory nature, where dancers and musicians often assume interchangeable roles. This research seeks to analyze how Zapin performers interact with each other, the audience, and the cultural context in which the performance occurs, aiming to uncover the underlying dynamics that shape Main Zapin performances by examining the role of improvisation, the impact of audience engagement, and the balance between traditional elements and contemporary influences. Understanding these interactions is crucial for appreciating the central role of performers in the Main Zapin tradition, as it provides insights into how they navigate and negotiate their cultural heritage in a modern setting, contributing to a deeper understanding of Main Zapin and its significance within Malay culture. Understanding the dynamics influencing Zapin performers is essential for the preservation and revitalization of this cultural tradition, as Main Zapin is a living cultural expression that embodies the values, history, and identity of the Malay community. This research offers valuable insights into the cultural processes that sustain Main Zapin by focusing on the performer's perspective and the various influences they navigate, which is critical for developing effective preservation strategies that respect the evolving nature of traditions and support performers in engaging meaningfully with their cultural heritage.

Literature Review

Folk dance performances have a long history rooted in cultural traditions and social gatherings, with their origins dating back centuries. Initially, these dances were community-based activities where the distinction between performers and audience was minimal. Hoerburger (1968) termed this "first existence" folk dance, characterized by spontaneous participation and informal transmission within communities, a concept that directly informs the study of Main Zapin. This spontaneity is a defining feature of Main Zapin, where improvisation and real-time interaction play crucial roles. Over time, folk dance presentations became more formal, altering performer interactions. However, Main Zapin has retained its community engagement aspect, where the audience is encouraged to participate actively, blurring the lines between performers and spectators. The "second existence" folk dance, as Hoerburger describes, emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, featuring organized

groups performing for non-participating audiences, thereby formalizing the roles of performers and spectators. Nasuruddin (1994) asserts that in the context of Malaysia, Malay traditional dances have evolved from rudimentary ritual movements to folk dances, ultimately becoming more intricate and refined. Nahachewsky (1995) elaborates on this transition from participatory to presentational contexts, changing the dynamics of performer interactions. In Main Zapin, performers exhibit remarkable versatility, often switching roles between dancers, musicians, and even active participants within a single performance.

Theoretical frameworks from various disciplines, such as Schechner's performance theory and Turner's concepts of "communitas" and "liminality," provide a robust foundation for analyzing the complex interactions in Main Zapin. Schechner's (1988) performance theory, particularly his concept of "restored behavior," helps understand how performers adapt traditional movements to contemporary contexts. This theory directly informs the study of Main Zapin by providing a lens through which to examine how Zapin performers navigate their roles in modern performances while maintaining traditional elements. The versatile roles of performers in Main Zapin, as dancers, musicians, and active participants, can be analyzed through Schechner's (2017) framework of "restored behavior," which illustrates how traditional practices are adapted and expressed in contemporary contexts.

Hanna's (1979) application of nonverbal communication theory and Turner's (1969) ideas of "communitas" and "liminality" as applied by Dietrich (2015) offer further insights into the transformative nature of folk dance performances. In Main Zapin, nonverbal communication is crucial as performers engage with each other and the audience through movements, gestures, and facial expressions. This nonverbal dialogue helps establish a sense of community or "communitas" among participants, creating a shared experience that transcends individual performance. Turner's concept of "liminality," or the transformative stage of performance, is evident in Main Zapin as performers and audiences temporarily leave their everyday identities to engage in the dance, fostering a collective cultural experience.

Folk dance involves complex interplays between participants. Dancer-to-dancer interactions, essential in many traditions, often involve synchronized movements, physical contact, and nonverbal

communication, as Koutsouba (1997) notes in Greek folk dance. Similarly, in Main Zapin, synchronized movements and physical interactions between dancers are vital for creating a cohesive performance. Dancer-musician interactions are equally crucial, with Rice (1995) illustrating the dynamic dialogue in Bulgarian folk performances. In Main Zapin, this interaction is characterized by the seamless transition of performers between dancing and musicking roles, highlighting the importance of adaptability and communication. Audience engagement, even in presentational contexts, often includes clapping, singing, or vocal encouragement, creating a participatory frame within the performance (Turino 2008). Traditions like Irish céilí dances blur the line between performers and spectators, much like Main Zapin, where the audience is encouraged to participate and engage with the performers, contributing to the dynamic nature of the performance. In Main Zapin, this participation is not just supportive but integral, as active participants often influence the flow and energy of the dance, blurring the lines between performer and spectator.

Cultural variations in performer interactions reflect diverse social structures, historical contexts, and aesthetic values. Kaepler (1991) explores group synchronization in Polynesian dance, while Öztürkmen (2005) highlights the role of lead dancers in Turkish folk dance, mirroring social hierarchies. Gender dynamics also vary, with Washabaugh (1998) examining flamenco and Savigliano (1995) analyzing Argentine tango, both reflecting and challenging cultural norms. In Main Zapin, the interplay of gender dynamics and social hierarchies can be observed through the roles and interactions of performers, providing insight into the cultural context and significance of the dance. Challenges in studying performer interactions include capturing the ephemeral nature of dance and interpreting culturally specific traditions accurately. Future research may involve virtual and augmented reality technologies and larger-scale cross-cultural studies. Collaborative research models involving folk dance practitioners promise more nuanced and culturally sensitive insights (Buckland, 2006).

Despite extensive research on performer interactions in folk dance, a significant gap remains in understanding the specific dynamics within Main Zapin, a traditional Malay dance from Johor. Existing literature often focuses on the evolution of folk dance performance from participatory to presentational forms, emphasizing structured performer-

audience distinctions and cultural variations in performer interactions. However, the unique characteristics of Main Zapin, such as its inherent spontaneity, improvisational elements, and the dual roles of dancers and musicians, have not been sufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by examining the complex interplay between dancers, musicians, and the audience in Main Zapin performances. It highlights the holistic nature of these interactions, where performers are not merely executing choreographed movements but actively shaping the performance through personal expression and interaction with sound, costume, and emotional expression. The research underscores the importance of these relationships in appreciating Main Zapin as a living tradition and its implications for cultural preservation and revitalization efforts. Focusing on the emic perspective and documenting fieldwork in various localities within Johor, this study provides a deeper understanding of Malay dance culture. Moving beyond Western perspectives, the research offers insights into the dynamics and cultural significance inherent in Main Zapin performances. This approach enriches the comprehension of performer interactions in folk dance, highlighting the need for further research that appreciates the depth and richness of these traditions in their specific cultural contexts.

Methodology

The researcher's involvement in this study extends beyond academic interest, reflecting a profound connection to Main Zapin through years of active participation. This involvement facilitated a deeper understanding of community engagement, as the researcher actively participated in performances and interacted with both performers and audience members. This deep engagement offers unique insights into the cultural, social, and artistic dimensions of Main Zapin, enriching the analysis with an empathetic and culturally sensitive perspective. This dual role as researcher and participant offers a unique perspective on the potentials, challenges, and disjunctures within Main Zapin. The researcher is deeply invested in documenting and preserving Main Zapin that is rapidly disappearing compared to its more modern counterpart—Tarian Zapin, which dominates contemporary performance stages. This study is part of a larger effort to address the significant issue of evolving community needs and to explore ways for Main Zapin to thrive in contemporary contexts. Influenced by family traditions and community

practices, the researcher's journey has included extensive engagement in local and national events, deepening the understanding of the multifaceted meaning of Main Zapin within ethnochoreological paradigm, which includes the complex interplay between dancers, musicians, and audiences. This practitioner-researcher perspective brings an emic view, emphasizing the lived experiences of performers and the dynamics of their interactions with musicians and audiences. The dual role impacts data interpretation, allowing for an insider approach that recognizes subtle cultural cues often missed by non-participating observers, contributing critical insights that enrich the research findings with personal involvement and deep cultural understanding of Main Zapin.

To examine the multifaceted interactions between performers and various elements within Main Zapin, a comprehensive methodology was employed. This included observation, participant-observation, and non-structured interviews, aimed at mapping the interactions and relational dynamics from a performer-centric perspective. An emic approach was adopted to understand the culture from the native's point of view (Atkinson, 2007). This perspective highlighted the versatility of performers in Main Zapin, capturing how they fluidly transition between various roles during performances.

- i. Observation: The researcher meticulously observed Main Zapin performances, focusing on musical elements, choreography, and visual aesthetics. This method provided a detailed account of the interactions between performers and other elements, such as the audience and the cultural context. These observations were crucial for documenting the real-time dynamics and improvisational aspects that characterize Main Zapin.
- ii. Participant-Observation: The study utilized a combination of participant and nonparticipant observation techniques to gather data. As a participant observer, the researcher actively engaged with various stakeholders within the community, including cultural beholders, master-teachers, and both male and female participants. This approach facilitated a diverse range of responses and insights during performances. Actively participating in various roles such as audience member, dancer, musician, and emcee, the researcher enhanced their understanding of the complex interactions between dancing performers and other performers. This immersive approach allowed the researcher to

interact directly with performers and community members, gaining deeper insights into their roles and relational dynamics during performances. This method was essential for understanding the holistic nature of Main Zapin, where dancers and musicians seamlessly transition between roles. Participant observation captures the dynamic role of active participants who engage with performers. Their contributions, whether through vocal encouragement, clapping, or joining the dance, are essential for understanding the holistic nature of Main Zapin performances.

- iii. Non-Structured Interviews: Informal interviews were conducted with Main Zapin participants, including performers and community members, to gather qualitative insights into their personal perspectives and experiences. These interviews provided valuable information on the emotional expressions, cultural significance, and personal interactions within Main Zapin performances. This method enriched the study by capturing the subjective experiences of the performers and their engagement with the dance's various elements.

Combining these methods, the researcher actively involved the local community and performers to uncover the complex interactions and relationships in Main Zapin. This comprehensive methodology facilitated a thorough exploration of the artistic nuances and cultural significance of Main Zapin, highlighting the performer's central role in maintaining the dance's fluid and dynamic nature. The data collected through observations, participant-observation, and interviews were systematically analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and ability to identify patterns within qualitative data. The findings from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of Malay dance culture and its preservation through a performer-centric lens, providing an emic perspective that respects and represents the beholder's point of view.

The Central Role of the Performer

The performer (*pemain zapin*) plays a central role in Main Zapin, acting as the nexus that connects various elements of the performance. The term "pemain zapin" refers to the performers of Zapin, who assume an active role participating, especially in both dancing and "musicking."ⁱⁱⁱ The term "*pemain*" is widely used in relation to sports or games, such as "*pemain*

bola sepak” (football player); and literally means “a player of something” (*orang bermain atau yang memainkan sesuatu*); similar to how “*pemain biola*” refers to a violinist. In the context of Main Zapin, a “*pemain zapin*” is an active performer who plays the music, dances the dance, or even acts as an active audience member who can influence the course of the entire performance. Their engagement is not limited to mere participation but extends to shaping the performance through improvisation and interaction. The versatility and skills of the *pemain zapin* are crucial for maintaining the spontaneity and authenticity of Main Zapin, allowing for a fluid and dynamic performance environment. For the purpose of this paper, the term “performer” will be used instead of “player” to reflect the broader scope of their involvement in Main Zapin. This approach aligns with Schechner’s (2017) concept of “showing doing” in performance, emphasizing that Main Zapin involves not just play in isolation but a performative act that engages both the performers and the audience in a culturally significant display.

Pemain Zapin demonstrate versatility and multi-faceted skills, choosing to be either dancers, musicians, or active audience members during a performance, reflecting their deep understanding of all roles. This flexibility allows them to adapt and react fluidly, bridging the gap between dance movements, musical accompaniment, and audience engagement. Performers in Main Zapin often switch between dancing, musicking and participating roles from one performance to another, enriching the interaction and improvisation that are hallmarks of Main Zapin. This role flexibility is significant as it ensures that the performance remains lively and engaging, maintaining the spontaneity and authenticity of the tradition. Occupying a central position in the performance network of Main Zapin, performers are responsible for executing Main Langkah, Main Lagu and Main Isyarat, engaging with fellow performers, musicians, and the audience. This centrality ensures that performers orchestrate the flow of the performance, adapting in real-time to the audience’s reactions and the contributions of other performers. The interconnectedness of all elements within Main Zapin underscores the importance of the performer’s engagement and interaction in creating a cohesive and dynamic performance. The ability of performers to switch roles showcases their expertise and mastery of Main Zapin, contributing to the immersive and dynamic nature of the dance form. The versatility of performers is crucial for maintaining the rhythmic flow and visual harmony of Main Zapin, ensuring seamless coordination and synchronization of movements

and music. This flexibility not only enriches the performance but also underscores the performer’s significant role in preserving the tradition’s vitality and depth.

Interconnections and Interdependencies

The role of performers in Main Zapin is multifaceted, encompassing a range of interactions and responsibilities that go beyond mere viewing or the execution of movements and playing musical instruments. The fluid and versatile roles that the performers undertake within the dynamics of Main Zapin embody seamless ‘role interplay’ between being dancers, musicians, and active participants. This fluid identity is a testament to the holistic nature of the performance, where performative elements—movement, music and participation—intertwine to create a harmonious and playful experience. Performers not only express physicality but also contribute to the musical complexities, blurring the lines between these artistic dimensions.

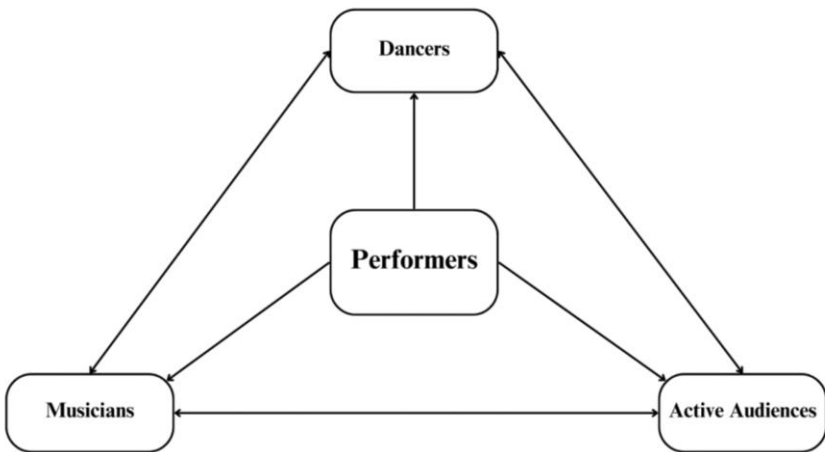


Figure 1: Relationships between performers in Main Zapin (Source: Author)

The intricate interplay between the four main elements of Main Zapin—(a) dance and music, (b) performers and audiences, (c) performance settings, and (d) costume and attire—constitutes a complex

and dynamic performance environment.ⁱⁱⁱ Each element contributes uniquely to the overall experience, shaping the interactions and relationships that define Main Zapin. The performers within this sphere of Main Zapin elements^{iv} are both shaped by and shaping the “entire configuration” (Kealiinohomoku, 1974, p. 99) of the dance. In Main Zapin, the performers establish complex connections amongst themselves (see *Figure 1* above), enriching the overall performance experience. Their ability to switch between roles of dancer, musician, and participant exemplifies the versatility that is central to Main Zapin. *Figure 1* illustrates the dynamic relationships within Main Zapin performances, highlighting the central role of “Performers” who possess the flexibility to engage as either dancers, musicians or active audiences. Bidirectional arrows between these roles indicate the fluid transition and adaptability of performers, reflecting their comprehensive understanding of both dance and music. “Active Audiences” are also integrated into the diagram, connected to both “Dancers” and “Musicians,” emphasizing the participatory nature of Main Zapin. Audience members actively engage with the performance through cueing (Main Isyarat), clapping, singing, or vocal encouragement, contributing to the overall vibrancy and spontaneity. This diagram captures the multifaceted interactions and the essential versatility of performers, underscoring the importance of engagement and adaptability in sustaining the tradition and enhancing the performance’s dynamic nature.

Dancer - Fellow Dancers

The heart of Main Zapin beats with collaboration, where each dance performance emerges as a joint effort. A Main Zapin performance is a form that is constructed by the hands of multiple dancers, never the pursuit of a solitary figure on the dance mat. Instead, it succeeds upon the collaborative synergy between each performer and their fellow dance partners. Throughout the course of these cooperative performances, performers engage in an ongoing dialogue that spans both the preparation phase and the actual act of dancing. This continuous conversation serves a crucial purpose—it orchestrates the synchronization of steps and the creation of dynamic choreography that leaves a lasting impression. Dancers engage with their fellow performers in a dance of dialogue through Main Isyarat, ensuring that steps are coordinated and choreography is alive with energy. In Main Isyarat, dancers collaboratively decide on the terminology to be used as cues, whether through a numerical

system (e.g., Langkah Satu, Langkah Dua) or a movement-characteristics-based naming system (e.g., Langkah Lenggang, Langkah Acah, Langkah Potong Wajik etc.). Within this shared effort, effective communication among performers takes centre stage, acting as the essential element for a harmonious play-performance. Intriguingly, deliberate non-communication can also serve as a creative choice, leading to impromptu movements that embody the concept of *langgar* (literally: breach—as in breaking the rules).

While effective communication is undeniably a key to success, an intriguing dimension emerges in *Main Langkah* (playful act of performing movement motifs) when performers consciously deviate from movement conventions. This is where the concept of *langgar* comes into play, where performers intentionally sidestep the traditional modes of dancing. Within this context, performers may choose to dance without explicit coordination, leading to spontaneous movements that inject an element of unpredictability into the performance. This creative freedom underscores the versatility and adaptability of Main Zapin dancers, showcasing their ability to express themselves outside the confines of established norms. Whether through harmonious coordination or the intentional absence of communication, the interplay among performers continues to be an important factor that elevates the Main Zapin experience.

Dancer – Musician

This collaborative synergy between dancer and musician is where each entity complements the other, resulting in a harmonious play-performance presentation. Musicians provide the essential musical canvas, offering the instrumental or vocal elements that create the soundscape. Dancers, in turn, seamlessly blend movement and melody, responding by singing along as they dance, further enriching the musical canvas. This symbiotic relationship exemplifies the essence of Zapin, where both movement and music intertwine to form a complete whole.

Communication takes centre stage within this partnership. Dancers, with a clear vision of their artistic intentions, manipulate the *isyarat* (cues), communicating their desires to the musicians. This transforms the playful strategy from Main Isyarat into Main Lagu, indicating that the dancers are now shaping the course of the music during the performance. These intentions include the musical choices (song

repertoire), desired dynamics, tempo shifts, and phrasing that will infuse the musical canvas. Dancers may also determine the texture of the *lagu* (music), manipulating the conventional melodic structure into requiring the simplest texture, consisting of a single melodic or rhythmic line without any accompaniment of other instrumentation. For instance, they might demand instrumental rhythmic patterns from marwas and dok to replace the opening section of *taksim* (improvised gambus solo). Musicians then take on the role of interpreters, translating these artistic intentions into musical expressions that resonate with the core of the performance. This interpretative process enhances the emotional resonance of the entire show, breathing life into each movement and note. A remarkable aspect of this collaboration is the musicians' ability to adapt their playing style to complement the dancers' movements. This flexibility is showcased through various means, from adjusting the tempo to match the dancers' pacing, to tailoring instrumental accompaniments that seamlessly blend with the performers' actions.

Performer – Audience

During Main Zapin, a captivating exchange transpires between performers and audience—a dynamic interaction that adds an extra layer of depth to the performance experience. This interplay transforms the space from a mere dance floor into a vibrant arena of interactions and energies. In Main Zapin performances, the audience takes on two primary roles: active and passive.^v The findings reveal that active participants frequently engage in ways that significantly impact the performance. Their involvement, such as providing rhythmic support or joining in the dance, demonstrates their integral role as performers within Main Zapin. Active audience members transcend the role of mere spectators, becoming participants in the performance and blurring the line between observers and performers. They may transition from watching to joining the dance or interacting with the performers, or simply interfere or cross the dancing and musical space.

During several performances observed, active participants fluidly transitioned between roles of spectator and performer. Their engagement included spontaneous clapping on the downbeats to provide rhythmic countings, overlapping the syncopated marwas beats, echoing significant vocal phrases in the *pantun* (the main melodic structure of zapin music consisting of sung-quatrain), and engaging in cheer-teasing of musicians

or dancers during the performance. These actions underscored their integral role as co-creators in the performance experience, highlighting the communal and participatory nature of Main Zapin. This can significantly impact the performance, as their movements and presence in the performance area introduce elements of unpredictability and spontaneity. Such interactions can disrupt the established choreography and musical flow, challenging performers to adapt in real-time and maintain the integrity of the performance. This fluid and dynamic interaction between the audience and performers enriches the experience, as it demands a heightened level of engagement and responsiveness from both sides. Additionally, this involvement underscores the communal nature of Main Zapin, where the boundaries between performers and audience are intentionally blurred to create a more inclusive and participatory cultural event.

Performers, extend their performance beyond the confines of the dancing and musical space. They actively engage with the audience, inviting them to become part of the performance with non-verbal *isyarat* or verbal *isyarat* in simple words such as *jom* (come join us) and *masuk* (come enter the dancing space) or even approach the audience and guide them to the dancing area. This engagement is not merely a one-sided affair but a reciprocal exchange that influences the entire tone of the show. As performers pour their energy into each step and gesture, they draw inspiration from the audience's reactions. Positive responses from the audience have the remarkable power to elevate the performers' own energy levels and refine their delivery, resulting in a more vibrant and spirited presentation.

In the midst of their routines, performers intentionally interact with the audience, with different kinds of interactions. Occasionally, they use words such as *tak larat* (exhausted), *pancit* (out of breath), *penat* (tired), or *sakit lutut* (aching knees) to convey their feelings—or how their body feels—while dancing. This interaction is a bridge that connects the performance space with the audience, transforming passive spectators into active participants. A performer's ability to capture and maintain the audience's attention contributes to the immersive experience, blurring the line between performer and observer. This interaction, often characterized by joyful exchanges and shared smiles, forms an emotional bond that transcends mere entertainment. The audience's reactions act as a feedback loop, infusing the performance with a profound energy that reverberates

between the dancers and the spectators. This dynamic relationship between performers and their audience enhances the depth of the Main Zapin tradition, transforming each performance into a shared journey of emotions and movement.

Musicians play a pivotal role in shaping the audience's emotional experience, actively engaging them in the performance. By selecting specific pieces of music, they influence the overall ambience and encourage the audience to sing along or respond emotionally. Joy and excitement are frequently evoked through compositions that predominantly utilize major tonality, such as "Lancang Kuning," "Semerah Padi," and "Bunga Hutan." These tunes, characterized by major chords and scales, create a joyful atmosphere that invites audience participation and elevates the performance's energy. Conversely, moments of seriousness are crafted through songs with profound themes, like "Lagu Pantun Makrifat^{vi}." This song was specifically composed for Zapin Parit Sakai^{vii}, conveys profound spiritual values and religious teachings through its lyrics. This composition conveys spiritual values and moral teachings, prompting musicians to adjust their playing style to evoke a more solemn mood. The performers respond by adopting a serious demeanour, which, in turn, influences the audience's reaction and deepens their engagement with the performance's emotional content. Musicians' ability to tailor their playing style to complement the dancers' movements and the chosen songs is key to creating a cohesive and immersive experience. By adjusting the tempo, dynamics, and phrasing, they ensure that the music harmonizes seamlessly with the dancers' steps, enhancing the overall performance. This strategic manipulation of music not only captivates the audience but also transforms them into active participants, making the performance a memorable and emotionally resonant experience.

Analysis: The Multifaceted Role of the *Pemain* in Main Zapin's Dancescapes, Soundscapes, and Eventscapes

The multifaceted role of the *pemain* in Main Zapin presents a unique paradigm within the broader context of traditional dance forms. Unlike many structured performances (re)presented by Tarian Zapin (Zapin Dance) where roles are clearly delineated, the *pemain* in Main Zapin embodies a fluid identity that transcends conventional boundaries between dancer, musician, and audience member. This fluidity is not merely a surface-level characteristic but a fundamental aspect that defines

the very essence of Main Zapin as a living, breathing cultural expression. The *pemain*'s ability to seamlessly transition between roles of dancer, musician and audience exemplifies a holistic approach to performance that is relatively devoid in formalized dance traditions. This challenges the Western notion of specialized performers and instead presents a model where artistic expression is integrated across multiple domains. The term "*pemain*" itself, with its connotations of "play" rather than strict performance, underscores the improvisational and interactive nature of Main Zapin. This linguistic nuance reflects a deeper cultural understanding of performance as a participatory, communal activity rather than a presentational spectacle.

Within the dancescapes of Main Zapin, the *pemain*'s role extends beyond mere execution of choreographed steps. The concept of *langgar*, or deliberate deviation from established norms, introduces an element of spontaneity that keeps the performance dynamic and unpredictable. This improvisational aspect not only showcases the *pemain*'s versatility but also serves as a mechanism for cultural innovation within the confines of tradition. The *langgar* concept demonstrates how Main Zapin, through the agency of its performers, maintains a delicate balance between preservation and evolution of cultural practices. The soundscapes of Main Zapin is equally influenced by the *pemain*'s multifaceted role. The interplay between movement and music is not a simple call-and-response mechanism but a complex dialogue where the boundaries between sonic production and bodily expression are blurred. The *pemain*'s ability to contribute vocally while dancing, or to transition from instrumental accompaniment to physical performance, creates a rich, layered auditory experience. This integration challenges conventional notions of music and dance as separate entities, instead presenting them as interconnected facets of a unified expressive form. Perhaps most striking is the *pemain*'s role in shaping the eventscapes^{viii} of Main Zapin. The direct engagement with the audience, through verbal cues and physical guidance, transforms the performance space into an interactive arena. This level of audience involvement is not merely performative but fundamentally alters the nature of the event, turning spectators into active participants, becoming *pemain zapin* even though they remain stationary. The *pemain* thus becomes not just a performer but a facilitator of communal experience, embodying the social and cultural functions of Main Zapin beyond its artistic merits.

The *pemain*'s engagement with cultural context adds another layer of complexity to their role. By adapting performances to reflect cultural nuances and historical significance, the *pemain* becomes a custodian of cultural knowledge. This role extends beyond mere preservation; it involves active interpretation and communication of cultural values through the medium of dance and music. The *pemain* thus serves as a bridge between past traditions and contemporary audiences, ensuring the continued relevance and vitality of Main Zapin in modern Malay society. The interdependencies between the *pemain* in Main Zapin—fellow dancers, musicians, and audience—create a complex web of relationships that define the play-performance ecosystem. This interconnectedness challenges linear models of performance analysis and calls for a more holistic, systems-based approach to understanding traditional dance forms. The *pemain*, as the nexus of these relationships, embodies the collective cultural memory and creative potential of the community.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted and dynamic role of the *pemain* in Main Zapin, revealing a complex web of interactions that shape this traditional Malay dance form. It also reaffirms the classification of active participants as performers in Main Zapin. Their engagement and interaction not only enhance the performance but are crucial to its authenticity and dynamism. The research highlights how performers navigate and negotiate within the play-performance ecosystem, including fellow performers, musicians, and audience members. The *pemain*'s fluid identity, seamlessly transitioning between dancer, musician or audience roles, challenges conventional notions of specialized performance and underscores the holistic nature of Main Zapin as a unique Malay cultural expression. This fluidity not only distinguishes Main Zapin from more formalized dance traditions but also provides a model for understanding performance as an integrated, community-centered practice. The *pemain*'s direct engagement with the audience transforms the performance space into an interactive arena, emphasizing the social and cultural functions of Main Zapin beyond its artistic merits. This study highlights the pivotal role of the *pemain* in Main Zapin, illustrating how their multifaceted engagement fosters artistic expression, cultural preservation, and social facilitation. The findings underscore the importance of performer adaptability and audience interaction in sustaining the vitality of Main Zapin. This multifaceted identity provides a model for understanding

performance as an integrated, community-centered practice. The *pemain*'s ability to navigate and shape the dancescapes, soundscapes, and eventscapes of Main Zapin demonstrates the dynamic nature of living cultural traditions and the central role of individual agency in their perpetuation and evolution. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Malay dance culture by focusing on the central role of the performer, offering insights that move beyond Western perspectives. It highlights the importance of considering the complex dynamics and cultural significance inherent in traditional performances when developing strategies for cultural preservation and revitalization.

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ⁱ See more on the concept of “First and Second Existence Folk Dance” by Felix Hoerburger (1968) as discussed in *Once Again: On the Concept of “Second Existence Folk Dance”* by Andriy Nahachewsky (2001).

ⁱⁱ Musicking refers to any activity involving or related to music performance, such as performing, listening, rehearsing, or composing. The term was coined by the musicologist Christopher Small (see more at *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*, 1998). and emphasizes the social phenomenon of music, linking or aligning the mental and emotional states of two or more humans.

ⁱⁱⁱ See more discussion on the Main Zapin elements in Hamza, H. Z. (2023).

^{iv} The “sphere of Main Zapin elements” refers to the comprehensive and interconnected components that collectively define and influence Main Zapin performances. Together, these elements form a “sphere” because they are interdependent and collectively shape the Main Zapin experience.

^v In Main Zapin performances, passive audience members maintain a stationary presence during the event, appreciating the performance from a distance. While not physically participating, passive audiences still contribute to the dance’s atmosphere through their observations, reactions, and engagement in learning. Both active and passive audience roles enrich the immersive and dynamic character of Main Zapin performances. However, the unique and complex distinctions between these two roles are not explored in depth in this paper.

^{vi} Lagu Pantun Makrifat (Song of Spiritual Poetry) is a Zapin song composed by Salimi Mohd Shah (a Zapin master-teacher based in Muar, Johor) in September 2021. The melody of this song was inspired when he was relaxing after performing the Maghrib prayer, strumming the *gambus* on a bench on the porch of his house. The lyrics of this song were written by the late Omar bin Kasim around the 1970s and were handed down to his grandson, Mohd Iskandar Shah (Muar Zapin activist), to be adapted into a Zapin song. The late Omar was a skilled Zapin performer, as well as a religious teacher and the Imam of the Bukit Treh

Mosque during his lifetime. He and his brother, Hussin bin Kasim, a prominent Bangsawan theatre actor in Muar, used to perform Zapin together on the field (*padang*) of the Muo Club.

^{vii} Zapin Parit Sakai is one of the Zapin repertoires in Muar, Johor. It was originated in the village of Parit Siput, later renamed Parit Sakai due to population growth. This growth led to the division into Parit Sakai Lama and Parit Sakai Baru. Parit Sakai was once renowned for its Islamic study centres or *madrasahs*, which attracted people from Muar and other districts in Johor. Students at these madrasahs engaged in playing Gambus, singing Qasidah, berzanji, playing marwas, and performing Zapin as leisure activities. In the late 1990s, Mohd Iskandar Shah bin Abdullah, a Zapin coach and activist in the Muar District, independently researched and documented Zapin Parit Sakai. He gathered movements and information from successors and activists of Zapin Parit Sakai, including prominent individuals such as Wak Rahman from Parit Sakai, Wak Halus from Parit Bakar, Mokhtar bin Abdul Rahaman from Tanjung Agas, Wak Bahrin from Kampung Bagan Batu Pahat, and Omar bin Kassim from Parit Beting. The steps of Zapin Parit Sakai include Taksim, Langkah Asas (Alif or Langkah Satu), Langkah Dua, Langkah Tiga, Langkah Potong Wajik (Langkah Empat), Langkah Lima, Langkah Lam Alif (Langkah Enam), Langkah Acah (Langkah Tujuh), Langkah Lapan (another variant of Langkah Acah), kopak, and Wainab.

^{viii} Eventscapes, a notion that the author suggest (although not discussed in this paper), inspired from Arjun Appadurai's concept of '-scapes' in his theory of global cultural flows, refers to the complex, multidimensional environments in which cultural events or performances take place. In the context of Main Zapin and other performative traditions, eventscapes under the notion of what the local termed as "Permainan Zapin" encompass the totality of elements that constitute the event experience