



Understanding the Beauty of Movement and Meaning Behind Aceh Dance (Saman Dance)

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Abstract

Saman Dance, a cultural heritage from Aceh that has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, is a unique manifestation of local wisdom and Islamic values inherent in the Gayo community. This article examines the beauty of the movements and the deep meanings contained in Saman Dance, as well as its role in preserving Aceh's cultural identity. Through an ethnographic approach and semiotic analysis, this research explores the historical origins, choreographic structure, and symbolism of Saman Dance movements. The results show that every movement in Saman Dance has a philosophical meaning that is closely related to the teachings of Islam and the social values of Gayo society. The speed, uniformity, and complexity of the movements not only reflect aesthetic beauty, but also symbolize unity, discipline, and harmony in social life. Furthermore, the lyrics sung during performances contain profound moral and spiritual messages. This article also discusses the evolution of Saman Dance from a religious ritual to an internationally recognized performing art, as well as the challenges in preserving it in the modern era. In conclusion, Saman Dance is not just an artistic expression, but an important medium in transmitting cultural and spiritual values between generations. A deeper understanding of the meaning behind Saman Dance is expected to increase appreciation and efforts to preserve this cultural heritage.

Keywords: Saman Dance, Aceh, Cultural heritage, Islam, ethnography, semiotics, choreography, cultural values, cultural preservation, Gayo identity.

1. Introduction

Saman Dance, a cultural heritage originating from the land of Gayo, Aceh, has become a widely recognized Indonesian cultural icon, both domestically and internationally. In 2011, UNESCO recognized Saman Dance as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage, affirming the importance of this dance as a unique and significant cultural expression [1]. The beauty of Saman Dance lies not only in its dynamic and synchronized movements, but also in the deep meaning contained in it, reflecting the local wisdom and Islamic values inherent in Gayo society [2].

Saman dance, which is thought to have existed since the 14th century, was originally a proselytizing medium used by Sheikh Saman, a cleric, to spread the teachings of Islam in Aceh [3]. Over time, the dance evolved into a complex form of cultural expression, combining elements of

ritual, spirituality and performing arts [4]. The uniqueness of Saman Dance lies in its choreography that relies on fast and coordinated movements of the hands, body, and head, without the use of musical accompaniment other than the singing and clapping of the dancers themselves [5].

Although it has been the object of research in various anthropological and performing arts studies, there are still many aspects of Saman Dance that are not fully understood, especially with regard to the symbolic meaning behind its movements and its role in contemporary society [6]. This article aims to further explore the beauty of Saman Dance movements and uncover the hidden meanings behind them, as well as understand how this dance continues to play an important role in preserving Aceh's cultural identity amidst globalization [7].

Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines ethnographic, semiotic and historical analysis, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Saman Dance. By understanding the philosophical and spiritual values contained in every movement and lyric of Saman Dance, it is expected to increase appreciation for this cultural heritage and encourage more effective preservation efforts [8].

Furthermore, this article will also discuss the evolution of Saman Dance from a religious ritual to an internationally recognized performing art, as well as the challenges and opportunities in preserving and developing this dance in the modern era [9]. Thus, this research not only contributes to the academic understanding of Saman Dance, but also provides practical insights for the preservation and promotion of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

2. Materials and Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods and semiotic analysis to understand the beauty of the movements and the meaning behind Saman Dance. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural context, symbolic meaning, and values contained in Saman Dance.

2.1 Research Design:

This study uses an ethnographic case study design, focusing on the Saman Dance as a cultural phenomenon in the context of the Gayo community, Aceh.

Data Collection:

- a. Participatory Observation:
Researchers are directly involved in the practice and performance of the Saman Dance. Observe and record the details of movements, formations, and interactions between dancers.
- b. In-Depth Interview:
Conducting interviews with Saman Dance maestros, senior dancers, and Gayo community leaders. Semi-structured interviews to dig up information about the history, philosophy, and meaning of the Saman Dance movement.
- c. Document Analysis:
Examine historical literature, ancient manuscripts, and documentation of Saman Dance performances. Examining previous research on Saman Dance and Acehese culture.
- d. Audio-Visual Recording:
Record Saman Dance performances for detailed analysis of movements and formations. Documenting the rehearsal process and preparation for the show.

2.2 Data Analysis:

- a. Ethnographic Analysis:
Using a thick description approach to describe and interpret the cultural context of Saman Dance. Identify cultural themes that emerge from observation and interview data.
- b. Semiotic Analysis:
Analyze the symbolic meaning of movements, formations, and lyrics in Saman Dance.



Interpreting non-verbal signs in the context of Gayo and Islamic culture.

c. Comparative Analysis:

Comparing the interpretation of meaning from various sources (dancers, community leaders, literature) for data triangulation.

2.3 Data Validation:

Using member checking techniques by returning the results of the analysis to key informants for verification. Triangulation of methods by comparing data from observations, interviews, and document analysis.

2.4 Research Ethics:

- a. Obtained formal permission from traditional leaders and the local government.
- b. Maintained the confidentiality of informants and respected local cultural values.
- c. Ensuring informed consent from all research participants.

2.5 Research Limitations:

- a. This research focuses on Saman Dance in the Gayo region of Aceh, where the dance originated.
- b. The research period was limited to six months to observe the preparation and performance cycle of Saman Dance.

Through this research method, it is hoped that a deep and holistic understanding of the beauty of the movements and the meaning behind Saman Dance, as well as its context in contemporary Acehnese culture, can be obtained.

3. Results

3.1 Structure and Composition of Saman Dance

The Saman dance has a unique and complex structure. Based on observation and analysis, the structure of this dance can be divided into several main parts:

Table 1. Structure of Saman Dance

Part	Name	Description
1	Lingum	Opening with solo hum
2	Greeting	Opening greetings and introductions
3	Uluni Lagu	Beginning of the main song
4	Saman Song	Main section with movement variations
5	Anakni Song	Song closure

(Source: Researcher analysis based on [4] and [5])

The composition of the Saman Dance dancers generally consists of an odd number, usually 9 to 17 people, with a leader called a "sheikh" [2].

3.2 Analysis of Movements and Their Meanings

The Saman dance has about 30 basic movements combined in various variations. Some of the main movements and their meanings are as follows:

Table 2. Main Movements of Saman Dance and Their Meanings

Movement	Description	Symbolic Meaning
Girik	Shaking his head	Reject the bad
Lingang	Shaking	Humility
Tungkak	Please call my dad	Steadfastness of faith
Grunt	Simultaneous applause	Unity and harmony



3.3 Lyrics and Moral Messages

The lyrics in Saman dance contain deep moral and spiritual messages. Analysis of the lyrics shows several main themes:

- a. Belief in God and the glorification of God.
- b. Advice and moral teachings.
- c. Local wisdom and social values.
- d. The natural beauty of the Land of Gayo.

Examples of lyrics and their meanings:

"Sallallahu ala Muhammad, Sallallahu alaihi salam" (Meaning: Glorification of the Prophet Muhammad as a form of obedience to the teachings of Islam) [7].

3.4 Costumes and Symbolism

Saman dance costumes have a deep symbolic meaning:

- a. Black color on the shirt: symbolizes leadership and authority.
- b. Filigree motif: depicts Gayo flora.
- c. Headband: a symbol of Gayo unity and identity [6].

3.5 Saman Dance Evolution and Adaptation

Research shows that Saman Dance has evolved from a religious ritual to an art performance:

- a. 14th-19th centuries: Main function as a medium for proselytizing.
- b. Early 20th century: Started to be performed in traditional events.
- c. 1960s: Introduced as a national performing art.
- d. 2011-present: Recognized by UNESCO and became a cultural icon of Indonesia [1].

3.6 Preservation Challenges

Some of the main challenges in the preservation of Saman Dance:

- a. Modernization and changes in the lifestyle of the Gayo people.
- b. Lack of interest from the younger generation to learn Saman Dance in depth.
- c. Risk of commercialization that could reduce the sacred value of the dance.
- d. Limited documentation and traditional inheritance system [9].

3.7 The Role of Saman Dance in Contemporary Society

Saman dance still plays an important role in contemporary Acehnese society:

- a. As a medium to strengthen Gayo cultural identity.
- b. A means of transmitting moral and spiritual values between generations.
- c. A tourism asset that supports the local economy.
- d. An instrument of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the international arena [3].

3.8 Innovation and Development

Some innovations in the development of Saman Dance:

- a. Integration of technology in the performance (for example, the use of LED lighting)
- b. Collaboration with contemporary art forms
- c. Development of Saman Dance education programs in schools
- d. Creation of new variations that retain the traditional essence [10].



Figure 1. Saman Dance from Aceh

4. Discussion

The results showed that Saman Dance has a much more complex structure and meaning than is commonly understood. Every movement, from Rengum to Anakni Lagu, has deep cultural and spiritual significance [5]. This shows that Saman Dance is not just an art performance, but a medium rich in philosophical and religious values. This finding is in line with the opinion of Kartomi [2] who emphasizes the importance of understanding traditional dance in its original cultural context.

Analysis of the lyrics and movements of Saman Dance reveals an interesting syncretism between Islamic teachings and the local wisdom of the Gayo people. This can be seen from the use of Islamic terms combined with traditional Acehnese symbolism [8]. This phenomenon reflects a longstanding process of acculturation in Aceh, as discussed by Abdullah [3] in the broader context of the interaction between adat and Islam in Indonesia.

The evolution of Saman Dance from religious ritual to national and international performing arts demonstrates the adaptability of traditional culture in the face of changing times. However, this adaptation also raises questions about authenticity and the risk of over-commercialization [5]. This discussion is relevant to the broader debate on how to preserve intangible cultural heritage in the era of globalization, as discussed by Nilan [6].

The challenges in Saman Dance preservation, especially regarding the interest of the younger generation and the risk of commercialization, reflect the dilemma facing many traditional cultural heritages. It raises the question of how to balance the preservation of traditional values with the need to remain relevant in a modern context [7]. Innovative efforts such as technology integration and educational program development offer potential solutions, but also require further study of their impact on the cultural essence of Saman Dance.

The role of Saman Dance in strengthening Gayo cultural identity and as an instrument of Indonesian cultural diplomacy demonstrates the potential of traditional arts in a broader context. This is in line with the concept of 'soft power' in international relations, where cultural elements can be an important asset in building a positive image of a country [11]. However, it is important that international promotion does not sacrifice the intrinsic value and local context of Saman Dance.

Innovations in the development of Saman Dance, such as the integration of technology and collaboration with contemporary art, raise interesting questions about the boundary between innovation and authenticity. On the one hand, innovation is necessary to maintain the relevance and appeal of Saman Dance for new generations. On the other hand, there is a risk that too drastic a change could diminish the traditional essence of this dance [10]. A careful and balanced approach is needed in developing Saman Dance in order to maintain the core values while adapting to the demands of modern times.

The findings in this study pave the way for further exploration. Some interesting areas for future research include:

- Comparative studies between Saman Dance and other traditional dances in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.
- In-depth analysis of the impact of UNESCO recognition on local practices and perceptions of Saman Dance.
- Investigation of the role of digital technology in the documentation and transmission of knowledge about Saman Dance.

5. Conclusions

Saman dance is a rich example of the complexity and dynamics of intangible cultural heritage. This research shows that to truly understand and preserve this kind of heritage, a holistic approach is needed that considers historical, cultural, spiritual and socio-economic aspects. The challenge ahead is how to maintain the essence and core values of Saman Dance while allowing it to evolve and remain relevant in a changing global context.

The conclusion of this research shows that Saman Dance is not just an art performance, but a cultural heritage that is rich in meaning and value. The beauty of its movements lies not only in its visual aesthetics, but also in the philosophical and spiritual depths it contains. Despite facing various challenges in the modern era, Saman Dance continues to adapt and evolve, proving its relevance as an important medium in the preservation and transmission of Acehese cultural values.

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