

Documenting Dian Dancers' Two Decades of Malay Cultural Youth Activism

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Abstract

This article is a preliminary endeavour to document a Malay dance youth group, Dian Dancers' twenty years of activism (2003-2023) in promoting Malay dance practice to youths in Singapore. Written through a scholarly personal narrative, it features a reflections and critical perspectives of Dr. Noramin Farid who is an active Singaporean Malay dance practitioner-scholar and the group's co-founder. This documentation offers insights to a selection of Dian Dancers' productions and activities. It also presents the group's key focus namely, international and interlocal collaborations; creating platforms for young choreographers; and their adaptation to evolving conditions – particularly the Covid-19 period. Ultimately, the objective of this article is to address the need for highlighting the activism of current and succeeding generations of practitioners to show the evolving practice in the art world and the adaptability of its practitioners.

Keywords: Malay Dance, Singapore, Youth Activism, Intergeneration

This article serves as a documentation of Dian Dancers contributions to the Malay dance scene in Singapore since its inception in 2003. The group had recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a series of three dance productions that commenced in July 2023 and culminated in May 2024. I write this essay retrospectively as both an observer of the group's development and as someone who is taking a leadership role as the group's co-founder: framed and offering reflections through a scholarly personal narrative. The objective of this essay is two-fold: (a) to document Dian Dancers' development especially since it is created by millennials and focused on its 20 years of activism; and (b) to work against the infantilizing of "youth" groups and recognise Dian dancers' members contribution to an evolving scene. The latter in my view is the result of the politics in the Malay dance scene, which to borrow Chandra Muzaffar a Malaysian political science scholar's term, Hang Nadim Syndrome (*Sindrom Hang Nadim*), a disposition of scepticism by elite/veteran stakeholders towards younger and emerging practitioners who are also vying recognition in the scene (Naratif Malaysia).¹

Through this article, I will argue that Dian Dancers' existence, as an organisation that was created in the turn of the new millennium, was symptomatic and become a turning point for a rising generation of millennial artists who were slowly starting to take on leading roles under the watchful eyes of their veterans who have yet to fully retire from the scene. This is especially problematic when we consider that some of the veterans within the scene were only about to peak in their career trajectory. Thus, the assumed premature rise of millennial youths caused quite a stir in the early 2000s. The veterans were sceptical of a rising generation of practitioners who have yet to fully understand the depth of Malay dance and not undergone the necessary rites of passage (struggles, discipline, rigour) to fully take on teaching and leadership roles. Some of these millennials were students of the practitioners of preceding generations and were not principal dancers. Hence, the concerns elders had on these youths, who were not the best of performers, were their incapability to teach and transmit knowledge of Malay dance properly and holistically. In that period, Dian Dancers was one of a few groups that were initiated by youth leaders (then within the age range of 18 - early 20s) such as Attri Dance Foundation (now Attrians) and Ayunda Lestari and other groups that were started by seniors of a preceding generation, such as Azpirasi Dance Group, Kirana Seni and Artiste Seni Budaya Tepak Sireh (now Artiste Seni Budaya).

A Note on Methodology

As I write this through a scholarly personal narrative, I would like to provide a short note on what such a methodology entails. Education scholar, Robert J. Nash, is the proponent this writing method, which he explains, “is a style of public-intellectual writing based in storytelling and self-disclosure, one that draws from a variety of academic and non-academic references and findings” (2013, 39). I personally feel that such a writing style finds itself on the same grounds as autoethnography, the latter which is doing in-situ research with a critical awareness of the researcher’s presence and power – placing the positionality of the researcher to the fore as a reminder that all research is inherently subjective. I see any reflective modes of writing, especially when the writer/researcher is aware of their privilege to be necessary and urgent to provide some heart to scholarly work that can be regarded as “cold” and “impersonal”: the maxim “the personal is political” is the basis of such methodologies that grounds itself in the realities of the world that is consistently operating within sites of class, gender, racial and political struggles.

Dian Dancers’ Beginnings: From Community Clubs to Industrial Site

Dian Dancers is the brainchild of Abdul Yazid Bin Mohamed Juhuri (b. 1982) who started the group on 13 December 2003.² The group began with about 10 students, mostly female, of a Malay dance co-curricular activity (CCA) from now-defunct Institute Technical Education (ITE) Bishan campus.³ Two pioneer members, Muhammad Izwan Sarif (b.1985) and myself, Muhammad Noramin Mohd Farid (b. 1986) were later invited and our position elevated as co-founders in 2005 to help develop the group further.⁴ Armed with an intention to “enlighten and envision culture beyond” (*menyuluh wawasan budaya*) which is the group’s motto, Dian Dancers had an aim to elevate Malay dance to greater heights and we had intended to proceed forward with working with youths especially since, all the founders were also instructors in secondary and tertiary schools. This meant that we have access to a pool of enthusiastic and curious students who wanted to pursue dance outside of their school environment and probably get a taste of what it means to do dance “professionally”.

We saw that in educating youths who were as passionate as ourselves to engage deeper with the cultural form, we were helping a generation of youths to understand their culture and performing arts better. This symptomatic of the increasing cultural amnesia amongst Malays in Singapore as purported by Malay studies scholar, Azhar Ibrahim, whose book, *Narrating Presence: Awakening of Cultural Amnesia*, details the socio-historical conditionings that have rendered Malay Singaporeans illiterate of their own literatures and cultural understanding. In a nutshell, we were definitely holding tight to the idea that youths are the leaders of tomorrow and we felt an investment of time and effort to educate and train youth practitioners well was the key to the continued survivability – against an impending cultural amnesia,

The group brought our activities out of the educational institution to the community club (CC) circuit, moving from Taman Jurong CC (West of Singapore) to Yio Chu Kang CC (North) and eventually calling Kallang CC (Central) home from about 2007.⁵ In 2013 (a decade after the group's inception) the group was registered as a formal entity with the Registrar of Societies and formed a constitution which required them to have an elected committee (every 2 years) and yearly Annual General Meeting. This came at the height of an increasing need to professionalise and join the ranks of other Malay dance organisations who have become formal entities that are registered with organisations of authority such as ROS and Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA). Furthermore, it was necessary to be registered in order to gain tenancy of arts spaces and receive rental subsidies from the National Arts Council (NAC) – a statutory board of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

Dian Dancers was given an arts space in 2013 at the newly opened Aliwal Arts Centre (a refurbished building of former adjoined schools, Chong Cheng and Chong Pun schools) at 28 Aliwal Street under National Arts Council's Framework of Arts Spaces. We were one of the pioneer tenants of this arts space which was strategically located at the heart of Kampong Glam, a historic area of Malay-Muslim activism and cultural activities. During our tenancy there, we contributed actively to the centre and the area's many activities such as the Aliwal Arts Night Crawl and Beats on Baghdad Street.

After about half a decade at Aliwal Arts Centre, in 2018 the group moved its activities to an industrial site in the north of Singapore (Woodlands) due to the climbing rental prices as the arts centre is located in an increasingly commercialised and gentrified area, transformed for the purposes of heritage tourism.⁶ The newly rented space was merely a room to store more than a decade of costumes and props – many large pieces which were part of bigger production sets were discarded. Dance practices resumed at the shared spaces around the industrial site, usually at the parking lot sites which also had forklifts and delivery vans of other companies operating within the industrial building. Our dancers understood what this relocation entailed and acclimated to the conditions of the site such as the “ritual” of cleaning one’s feet at the end of the rehearsal due to the black soot that had covered the soles of their feet and acknowledge the risk of hurting themselves should they step unto sharp objects such as a nail or glass.

Dian Dancers’ main source of income, like many Malay dance groups that are engaged commercially, would come from wedding shows and the membership fees coming from the members themselves. However, during our tenancy at Aliwal Arts Centre, we had started performing for corporate shows and successive dance productions: thus, the sum of donations recorded were from the talent fees of our members (usually about 50% of the fee) who were involved in our end-year annual productions. The donations came from their own good will as we are not a charitable entity and donors to our cause do not benefit from any kind of tax exemption.

Inaugural Performances: A Selected Overview

In tandem with a sense of rites of passage for any newly formed group, our first production is regarded as a debut so that we can be taken seriously by our predecessors. Dian Dancers inaugurated our existence in 2009 (about 6 years after inception) within what can be called as an “art world” as purported by cultural theorist, Howard Becker, who defines it a “network of people whose cooperative activity, organised via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works the art world is noted for” (2008, xxiv).⁷

Our debut performance, *Nadi: Denyutan Nadi, Titik Permulaan...* premiered on 13th February 2009, at Cultural Auditorium in Tampines East Community Centre. Upon retrospection and reference to the press

release that I wrote as the producer of the production about 15 years ago, the event boasts traditional dance items of the 5 “endorsed” music-dance genres (*Asli, Inang, Masri, Joget and Zapin*), with most dance items using typical props found in Malay culture and dances ranging from *sireh dara* (floral arrangement commonly see in weddings), *gunungan* (triangular structure), conical hats, fans and handkerchiefs.⁸ After a presentation of an array of new creation (*kreasi baru*) Malay dances, the second segment featured a presentation of contemporary Malay dance works which were dance pieces embedded with “contemporary” versions of Malay dance aesthetics, usually a creative exploration that is inspired from Malay music-dance genres, experiences and/or narratives. Dance seniors and veterans were also invited to attend as honorary guests so as to grace and also give their endorsement of the young artists. This continues to be a common presentational format of most Malay dance performances.

In 2013, in celebration of our new status as a registered group and coinciding with our 10th anniversary, the founders wanted to challenge ourselves to present work on a more professional stage (i.e. not at community club (CC) setting). There seems to be an ongoing perception within the art world that activities at CC-level are not always highly regarded – ironic since many of the other senior groups and senior personalities were themselves pioneers of Malay dance activities at a CC-circuit.⁹ We presented *Sedekad: Mengukir Perjalanan, Menyuluh Wawasan* (Decade: Carving A Journey, Enlightening A Vision) at School of the Arts (SOTA) Drama Theatre on 20th December 2013. Other than the founding members who became choreographers for the production, we invited Malaysian choreographer, Mohd Zulfaqar Bin Awalludin (Belalang) as well as one of our pioneer dancers, Nur Azilla Abdul Rahman to join as the sole-female choreographer for the production.

The management of this production proved to be very challenging and was riddled with many issues ranging from miscommunication, lack of funds and experience to manage a project of this scale. Though I was the de facto producer for the group, I was inexperienced in gaining funds from other bodies (not only National Arts Council) and had a steep learning curve to understand how financial grants work and how to best navigate the management of funds. In hindsight, the founders were also trying to understand how to work effectively with each other and despite our decade-old friendship, we had many unsettled issues that were piling up and needed resolving. The inexperience of working on *Sedekad* had a

long-lasting impact on founders' relations because, though it was a celebration of our existence, it also tested our friendship many years on. It was interesting to note that Dian Dancers initial developments were also in tandem with the founders' development who had to vie for themselves being independent from their Gurus and negotiating their own artistic prides and life's progression. It must also be said that the founders were all in our late 20s - early 30s, transitioning adulthood and life's milestones.

Imbued with the memories of *Sedekad*'s challenges, in early 2022, as the president during that time, I set out to plan Dian Dancers' 20th year anniversary celebrations. I had intended to propose a celebration in the north, west, east and west of Singapore, a touring show to have closer engagement with the people and for Dian Dancers to be better known. However, as a youth group with an increasing number of Generation Z members, there was some apprehension as many of the members thought that an awareness of Dian Dancers achievements and presence can be done quite easily via social media. They had suggested that better online activities through Instagram and TikTok was the strategy. I eventually conceded but I document this moment here as a commentary to the intergenerational negotiations that take place between millennial and Gen-Z practitioners within the group.

As president, I had certain objectives that I wanted to fulfil which were of course already in operation since the group's inception. However, I felt that this could be better articulated today after analysing the group's many strengths and weaknesses. Dian Dancers cannot be an official company because we acknowledged that the creative industry pie in Singapore was small, and we could not find dedicated students who were daring to take on full employment or to make dance a career. It is interesting to note here that most of our dancers were either high-school leavers who were transitioning into tertiary education or some who had entered Dian Dancers whilst they were still students at tertiary level. The latter was common because the founders are/were resident choreographers in the Malay dance Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) groups in tertiary schools, namely Millennia Institute, Temasek Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic.

With the reality of few career prospects and talents in check, we had stopped entertaining any future thoughts of making the group into a full-fledged company but to maintain the structure and conventions of the

group so that we may still contribute actively to the scene. Hence, I see this as a strength of the group and focused on creating a sense of comradeship, not only amongst their peers within the groups but also creating spaces for members of other groups to work closely and collaboratively with us. This is best seen in our productions when we offer opportunities for members of other local groups to join our activities as “friends of Dian”. The same can be said as well with international collaborators which I will elaborate further later.

The preparation in 2022 for the anniversary productions required proper planning because it would be a series of events with the goal of reaching out to more audiences and also give space for our alumni, who are mostly working individuals and parents, to come back to practice. What ensued later was a production, *Mekar Semarak: Celebrating the Nusantara*, in December 2022 and featured the collaboration of Universiti Malaya, Mak-Mak Menari (M3), Rehlah Nayyla and the Malay dance students of Kesenian Si Anak Tari of Temasek Polytechnic and Wangsa Kesari Seni of Singapore Polytechnic. In an attempt to show a more representative idea of the *Nusantara* or the Malay-Indonesian archipelagos, the production featured dance forms other than Malay dances which included the Ajat of Iban and Kancet of Kenyah peoples of Borneo; the Sundanese Tari Merak and Rantoyo dance of Java.

Subsequently, in 2023, using a similar format, *CahayaLoka: Two Decades of Dance* invited Universiti Malaya again who showed two works of *tari kreatif* (creative dance) genre inspired by the cultures of Sabah and Sarawak. This event received venue sponsorship and financial support from Our Tampines Hub (OTH). To date, the funds garnered for this specific event was the highest that Dian Dancers had thus far, up to threefold than the funding received in *Sedekad*. This showed to some extent how much the group has progressed to be receiving the sum of funds that could help in supporting our productions.

International and Intra-local Collaborations

I admit that the journey Dian Dancers had to go through was not an easy one. With a formation of any new group, senior groups would usually greet emerging groups with some disdain and scepticism. The art world is indeed a small network of groups and individuals: hence any news regarding Malay dance practitioners and activities are quickly disseminated. From my own observation as a Malay dance scholar, the

formation of new groups does not occur in a vacuum. Individuals initiating new groups would more often than not be former members of existing groups – with traceable genealogies – and have had some years of training and exposure in the art world.

Dian Dancers knew that in order for us to gain a sense of credibility within the scene we had to collaborate locally with other groups of the art world. *Ekspressi/Ekspresi* is the name of Dian Dancers' festival which was first conceived as a means to invite other Malay dance troupes in the country to perform alongside Dian Dancers. It was a strategic move by Abdul Yazid Juhuri so as to offer a gesture of friendship to other senior and junior groups – especially since the group's inception was riddled with much "fanfare". The first *Ekspressi* was in 2008 at Kallang CC, the same year the group called the CC home. Invited groups included Atrika Dance Company, Attri Dance Foundation (now Attrians), Ayunda Lestari, Kesenian Si Anak Tari, Gabungan Tari Muda Singapura and Perkumpulan Seni. These groups were made up of allies who had undergone similar rites of passage and Perkumpulan Seni and Atrika Dance Company as senior groups were the only senior groups that were sincerely supportive of our development since our inception.

In 2011, the second *Ekspressi* was held at The Republic Cultural Centre (TRCC) and featured some of the same groups from the first instalment with the inclusion of other active names in the scene such as Artiste Seni Budaya, Era Dance Theatre and Kirana Seni. The move to non-CC settings were similar to the reasons I provided above and we wanted to also provide the best kind of professional support that senior groups were already accustomed to.

The group was then invited to become part of the incubation arts group at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) from 2014 to 2016 in which we had to propose programmes to be commissioned by the centre and scheduled within the activities of the centre. We culminated our incubation residency with two productions at MHC, both boasting an international collaboration with groups from Malaysia and Indonesia. *TAMADUN: Dari Istana Turun ke Kota* (From the Palace to the City), premiered on 5 November 2016 at the lawn of MHC and featured collaborating groups, Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Yogyakarta (Indonesia), Jabatan Kebudayaan Kesenian Negara (JKKN) Negeri Johor cultural group with live traditional music accompaniment by Nobat Kota Singa. Focused on looking at dances

from courts to folk (village) forms, this production serves to show the plethora of performances from the two genres. However, unlike their counterparts who were presenting court dances that were derived from research and active practice by custodians, Malay dance in Singapore has no known court dances. Due to the lack of dances of such a genre, this production was also serving as a means for artistic director, Abdul Yazid Juhuri, to imagine what a Singaporean-Malay court dance would look like.¹⁰

The next month *Ekspresi: Ini Joget, Tari Kita*, was presented under the banner of *Ekspresi* which is usually held every 4-5 years. *Ekspresi: Ini Joget, Tari Kita* was presented at the MHC auditorium on 18 Dec 2016 with the cooperation of representatives from local groups (Atrika Dance Company, Azpirasi Dance Group, Era Dance Theatre, Penoraka Daya Tari, Perkumpulan Seni), Indonesian collaborator Angsana Dance Community from Tanjung Balai, Riau Islands and Malaysian collaborator, Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya (MBPJ; Petaling Jaya City Council). This production acknowledges the genre of *joget* as a music-dance form that unites the various countries of Malay cultural affinities. The first part of this production boasts unique dances of this specific genre and the second segment showed a collaborative attempt wherein the three choreographers representing their countries will work with a mix group of dancers from the three countries and to teach a *joget* dance from their country of origin.

To continue the spirit of intralocal collaborations, Dian Dancers has collaborated closely with Azpirasi Dance Group to represent Singapore in a few international dance festivals (South Korea in 2015) and a production, *Deruma – Sumpah* in January 2017.¹¹ This will be the last formal production pre-Covid 19 on a professional stage. I will share further the global situation that Dian Dancers, like many other groups, had to adapt to due to the dire situation.

Covid-19: Evolving Conditions

The year 2020 was a turning point for Dian Dancers as the Covid-19 pandemic adversely affected us and we had to almost immediately stop all activities. The motivation to move into the digital realm came to us when our own peers from the traditional Malay music scene started inviting fellow music and dance friends to collaborate. A music collective known as AluNada had uploaded a video on 31 March 2020 of their music

collaboration with local artists, featuring various instruments and singers.¹² Their collaborators had each recorded themselves performing their parts with a playback track and a video editor was engaged to piece all of the recordings together. What transpired was a video with a mosaic of recordings of each artist performing at home – the mosaic-look with multiple boxes of people engaged in a collective activity became a common digital aesthetic of that time – ensuring that everyone involved had a place in the recording.

AluNada had invited many dance groups to respond with their own choreographies to the music. A few groups such as Artistari Gentari (ATG), Attrians, Azpirasi Dance Group and Dian Dancers submitted their video recordings and were later incorporated with the original video with the musicians to show a sense of support and solidarity in a difficult time. A lot of coordination was in place to make the recordings happen because of the implementation of safety management measures (SMM) that were consistently evolving in response to the dire situation.

Another unfortunate situation that occurred was that Dian Dancers was just a few days away from the premiere of their dance theatre production, *Suri*, which was scheduled on 28 March 2020. The experience of the organising team leading up to that production was tense and challenging. We had near-sold out seats and were assuring our patrons two weeks prior to the show that *Suri* would commence as per usual. Due to the evolving situation, we had to give an update to remind anyone who showed symptoms of respiratory illness, flu and/or fever to stay home. Eventually, with a heavy heart we made the announcement 4 days before the premiere that we had to postpone the production to a later date. After many attempts later in the proceeding months and the grim realities of the pandemic, we eventually agreed to do a digital showcase of the work a year later on 27-28 March 2021 and presented it on a Malaysian-based online platform known as CloudTheatre. The recording procedure and the eventual presentation was possible because of the measures that permitted creative works to commence but with some limitations: the number of people and the distance between persons that were allowed to be in a recording session at any one time and the visible adherence to that same regulation must be observed in the eventual publication of the work online.

The skills acquired from moving from live to digital experience were put to good practice later in the year with *Ekspresi 2021: Meraikan*

Tari Kreasi, Merangkul Inovasi (Celebrating Creation Dance, Embracing Innovation). It was presented in three episodes on three dates (3, 10 and 17 December 2021). This show was specially curated to align Dian Dancers with Perkumpulan Seni – one of the two oldest Malay arts organisations, established in 1956. This exercise of aligning came at a time of reflection that Perkumpulan Seni as compared to its contemporary Sriwana (est. 1956) has not been given the same kind of attention in terms of reverence and recognition for the organisation's contribution to Singapore. As two of the three founders were former members of the group, it felt like an apt moment for the newly choreographed creation pieces to be based on repertoires of Perkumpulan Seni.

It was at this event that the debut of “new gen” choreographers were revealed. I will elaborate further on this in the next section as it coincides with the selection of our “new gen” choreographers who the founders have regarded as the next generation of choreographers and will continue the good name of the group.

Young Choreographers Programme

As I worked towards Dian Dancers' eventual 20th anniversary in 2023, I had to think quite seriously about re-generation and who amongst my senior dancers could best take on the role of successors of the group. I wanted a balanced number of male and female successors because through my observation of the scene in general there is a lack of female dance-makers in the scene and if Malay dance is a highly gendered form, then the role of female choreographers in demonstrating and transmitting gendered technique to execute feminine movements are pertinent. Aside from pragmatic reasons, I too felt strongly that the presence and activism of female choreographers offer an alternative to a patriarchal system. One example of an alternative model of community activism is *Mak-Mak Menari*, a Malay dance group that was formed by senior female dancers who came together to start their own dance troupe because they acknowledge their changed circumstances (ageing bodies and health) and added responsibility as mothers and wives.¹³

I had not considered then a longitudinal programme that can benefit the selected “new gen” choreographers. I just wanted to provide a platform, an opportunity for the youth choreographers to create something. Prior to this, I had offered one-off opportunities to select young choreographers but never a consolidated effort. It was for the digital

Ekspresi 2021 that I thought seriously about the regeneration and how I can best support their journeys. In order to do this, I re-evaluated my own journey as a choreographer and asked, “what is the kind of support that young choreographers need?”. In addition, I also considered other adjacent programmes that provided choreographic opportunities for young choreographers like Era Dance Theatre’s *Akar Subur* and residency programmes like the ones that Kaizen MD had curated for youth artists to explore choreographically and to attend masterclasses.

Through my own critical observation, I considered the following conditions and factors that would best facilitate a youth choreographer’s growth:

1. Curated growth with milestones to achieve
2. Artistic dialogue in terms of mentorship and regular consultations
3. Financial support in terms of paying talents and collaborators
4. Networking opportunities to meet with potential collaborators – especially composers who were able to work collaboratively with young choreographers.

The 5 choreographers were selected and presented their debut work as “new gen” choreographers in Ekspresi 2021. ‘Aizat Haikal Saini (b. 1989), Faiz Hairul Anuar (b. 1996), Hidayat Zainal (b. 1994) Nurul Farahani Idris (b. 1994), Rabiatuladawiyah Zakaria (b. 1993) and Syafiqah Shaharuddin (b. 1994). Faiz Hairul Anuar (b. 1996) was invited later and debuted his choreography in a succeeding event, T.I.G.A in 2023 after commitments to his university studies.

The three year programme that I curated constructively through the years of 2021-2024 ensured that the choreographers received adequate education and experience in choreography and performance. For Masterclasses, I curated in collaboration with Arki-Gen, an annual programme (2022 and 2023) entitled, Sinar Programme, wherein I invite dance masters to teach various aspects of performances and the different types of dances in maritime Southeast Asia. Some luminaries who were invited to teach were Indonesian choreographer, Wefi Sofianah (Betawi and Sundanese Dances), Singaporean choreographer, Lyn Hanis Rezuan (Javanese dances) and Malaysian choreographers, Imran Syafiq and

Kimberly Yap of ASK Dance Company (Terinai), Norsafini Jafar (Joget Gamelan) and Hafzal Aziz (Ajat).

After Ekspresi 2021, the new-gen choreographers were then tasked to present their new choreographies in other Dian Dancers productions such as *Mekar Semarak: Celebrating the Nusantara* (2022), *CahayaLoka: Two Decades of Dance* (2023) and *Dinamika!* (2024). In most of these presentations, they were also given monetary support to work collaboratively with music composers who can help the choreographers realise their work sonically. This process was important because from my observation of other showcases with aspiring choreographers, the engagement with musicians did not happen: there needs to be some effort to bridge dance and music because it is my belief that no work of art is complete if it is not thought through choreo-musically. If there was any retrospective critique to this programme, I wished I had taken more effort in getting these choreographers to evaluate the choreographies they have done thus far and also to do a cross-comparison with their peers. I feel strongly that they should be vouching for each other and acknowledging the work of their peers. It is with this heightened awareness can there be good appreciation for their contribution to the scene.

Concluding thoughts

This article has documented the milestones of Dian Dancers' development from a mere pastime group to its role as an advocator of youth activism and custodianship. I write this paper from my perspective as an active participant-observer who has had direct influence as a co-founder of the group. I regard Dian Dancers' responsibility as one of the youngest dance groups to provide platforms for youths to hone their skills in various aspects of dance-making and heritage promotion to be an important rationale for their resilience to keep on contributing to the art world.

This research is not without its challenges and limitations. Even in its 20th year of active contribution, the group has yet to demonstrate how it can join the ranks of prolific and iconic groups such as its predecessors, Sriwana and Perkumpulan Seni. Issues such as finding suitable prospective successors; youths scattered interests and multiple commitments; and the lack of resources to foster individual progression

within a group are but a few concerns that have and will continue to affect this youth organisation. These are concerns that also affect current dance groups and their engagement with youths.

This is the first proper attempt to document Dian Dancers two decades of activism. It does not serve to express that Dian Dancers is an important organisation on its own. As part of an evolving art world, this research acts as a reminder of the lack of scholarship on current Malay dance practices and (inter-)generational studies on dance transmission. The latter is of utmost importance because this research wants to decenter the few existing documentation that focuses on certain elite personalities and pioneer groups. This is necessary to show the evolution of transmission models and the ongoing efforts of an intergenerational group of practitioners whose labour should not be underestimated.

What is the larger implication of this scholarly personal narrative of documenting Dian Dancers' journey? There is a temporality to youth activism in that the youths that are doing this activism are gradually transitioning into phases of adulthood which poses many different challenges and obligations. Does that mean it is any less important because it is transitory phase? What I show through Dian Dancers' journey is the value of a ground-up initiative that puts youth cultural activism at the heart of our activities in the hopes that even when our youths transition into adulthood, they can become leaders of succeeding generations. I am also trying to say that an infantilising of youth activism (in any form) creates a huge disservice to an understanding of sociocultural development. If one is to consider and frame this through a study of resilience of indigenous and minority cultures, the ongoing efforts to promote and transmit Malay dance to succeeding generations is an act of defiance against cultural amnesia and sociopolitical conditionings of Malays in Singapore.

Post-Script: Dian Dancers After 20th Anniversary Celebrations

At the time of this publication, Dian Dancers would have recently ended *Dinamika!* in May 2024, a Malay Dance production that was supported and presented as part of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay's *Pesta Raya* at the DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre. As the group's outgoing president (2020-24), I took the responsibility of being the producer of four related productions in conjunction with the 20th anniversary. Three productions were produced under Dian Dancers – *Mekar Semarak: Celebrating the Nusantara* (December 2022),

CahayaLoka: Two Decades of Dance (December 2023) and *Dinamika!* (May 2024). These three productions had similar formats with invited local and international collaborators. A fourth production entitled, *T.I.G.A.* was produced under the newly formed collective, Tiga Collective, by us, the three founder choreographers of Dian Dancers who wanted an entity to continue to practise when we eventually “retire” from Dian Dancers in due time to allow for a new generation of leaders to take charge. I have refrained from standing for elections that are held every two years in accordance with the group’s constitution to accept a research fellow position with Universiti Malaya. I am still carrying out my responsibility as co-founder advising the current committee.

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Endnotes

1. This term is derived from the story of Hadim in the *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay annals that narrates the story of a young brilliant boy who gave advice to the Sultan regarding how the ruler can overcome the attacks of garfishes by the coast of Temasek. The boy was later killed because the ruler felt threatened. The term, *Hang Nadim Syndrome*, was used by Muzaffar to describe the conditions in which certain elites deny the perspectives of intellectuals causing the death of any thinking persons in favour of mediocrity. I take this term, extending Muzaffar's assertion, to relate to anything that brings a change to a certain modus operandi or conventions of working – in this case of Dian Dancers or any other emerging groups started by individuals, the idea of amateur persons leading groups is seen as threat to the “usual” way of doing things.

2. Abdul Yazid Juhuri is a choreographer. He started dancing with Putra Putri Seni, a Malay dance group CCA in ITE Bishan. His advancement in Malay dance was cultivated through his involvement with Perkumpulan Seni and People's Association's Malay Dance Troupe. He received his WSQ Diploma in Arts Management in 2014.

3. First established in 1992, ITEs are statutory boards under the purview of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and it is part of vocational and technical education in Singapore (Kow, 2011).

4. Md Izwan Sarif is a choreographer and a bridal business entrepreneur. He is the resident choreographer of Singapore Polytechnic's Malay dance CCA troupe, Wangsa Kesari Seni since 2012. Izwan's Malay dance journey began with People's Association's Teater Tari Era in 2002. He is also the co-founder and CEO of his bridal services company, PutihBridal which he established in 2010. Izwan received his WSQ Diploma in Arts Management in 2013. Noramin Farid is a choreographer, arts educator, and maritime Southeast Asian performing arts researcher. He learnt Malay Dance through Perkumpulan Seni. He holds a Ph.D in Drama, Theatre and Dance Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London.

5. Community Clubs (CCs) are located in neighbourhood precincts and function as “common spaces for people of all races to come together, build friendships and promote social bonding”. Due to their strategic proximity within and near

neighbourhoods, it “serves about 15,000 households or an average of 50,000 people” in a given area (People’s Association).

6. For insights regarding this phenomenon, read Channel News Asia report coverage of the gentrification of Kampung Glam (Samdin & Cunico, 2017[2021]).

7. I have written elsewhere regarding Malay dance in Singapore and the role of *persatuan-persatuan*, or associations, in leading the transmission and promotion of the form in Singapore (Farid, 2023).

8. I have argued that “‘Malay dance’ in Singapore is an umbrella term that comprises of five ‘endorsed’ folk Malay dance/music genres which are the Asli, Inang, Masri, Joget, and Zapin. I have used the term ‘endorse’ to indicate that the identification of these music/dance genres...is a process steeped in politicized structures of the community of practitioners working themselves in the context of Singapore and Malaysia” (Farid, 2023, 82).

9. Formed in July 1960 to foster a sense of cohesion and community building, this statutory board, this statutory board manages “2,000 grassroots organisations (GROs), over 100 Community Clubs, five Community Development Councils, National Community Leadership Institute and PAssion WaVe” (People’s Association).

10. I acknowledge the problematics of this imagined form and this would require a paper on its own. However, this imagining of a court dance is already in practise and convention amongst Malay dance practitioners in Singapore. Usually this form of dance would fall under the categorisation “Tari Persembahan” or Welcome Dance.

11. This production was presented in collaboration with Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay as part of its annual Pesta Raya event. It was the group’s first full fledged performance at the performance venue, usually regarded by some practitioners from the scene to be regarded as a *creme de la creme* of venues. This is largely due to the prestige given by elites, personalities and media regarding them and also the “world class” facilities it boasts. It claims to be “one of the busiest arts centres in the world... in 2002, [they] have presented more than 58,000 performances and activities, drawing 37 million patrons and 123 million visitors” (Esplanade).

12. AluNada has since deleted the video on youtube but the video featuring all collaborating groups can be found in their instagram, @alunada.muzik, uploaded on April 4, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-jO14PhT27/?hl=en>

13. I created a documentary theatre work with these mothers as part of M1 Fringe Festival in 2020. For coverage on the show and the perspectives regarding the stigma of dancing ageing bodies, read, Yeo 2020.