

Choreography as Decolonial Practice: Aesthetics of Piety and Modernity in West Sumatra's *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* Competitions

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Abstract

This article explores two dance choreographies, *Menghimpun Cahaya* (Gathering Light) and *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan* (Pilgrimage to the City of Rain's Prayer Hall), performed at the opening ceremonies of West Sumatra's Qur'anic recitation competitions (*Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an*, or MTQ) in 2019 and in 2021. While the MTQ have been studied as sites of performing piety, nationalism, and/or "goodness"; this article explores the role of choreography in articulating performative claims about Islamic knowledge production, cultural authority, and locally rooted constructs of modernity. Focusing on the MTQ as religious and political event, this article considers how choreographic practice shapes the construction of tradition and asserts the performing arts as a critical arena in which Minangkabau artists define their relationships to the past, present, and future of Muslim cultural identity. This article is in conversation with debates to decolonize performing arts and choreography through consideration of collaboration and autoethnography.

Keywords: *Islamic performing arts, MTQ, collaborative autoethnography*

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas dua karya tari yang berjudul *Menghimpun Cahaya* dan *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan*, dipentaskan pada upacara pembukaan *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ) Sumatera Barat pada tahun 2019 dan 2021. Meskipun MTQ telah dipelajari sebagai bagian pertunjukan kesalehan, nasionalisme, dan/atau "kebaikan"; artikel ini mengeksplorasi peran koreografi dalam mengartikulasikan klaim performatif tentang produksi pengetahuan Islam, kekuasaan budaya, dan konstruksi modernitas yang berakar pada konteks lokal. Dengan berfokus pada MTQ sebagai peristiwa keagamaan dan politik, artikel ini mempertimbangkan bagaimana praktik koreografi membentuk konstruksi tradisi dan menegaskan seni pertunjukan sebagai arena kritis mengenai cara seniman Minangkabau mendefinisikan hubungan mereka dengan masa lalu, masa kini, dan masa depan terhadap identitas budaya Muslim. Artikel ini membahas tentang

perdebatan dekolonisasi seni pertunjukan dan koreografi melalui pertimbangan kolaborasi serta autoetnografi.

Kata Kunci: *Seni pertunjukkan islami, MTQ, autoetnografi kolaboratif*

Introduction

Qur'anic recitation competitions are highly anticipated religious and cultural events in Indonesia. Since the first national *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ) took place in Makassar in 1968, trained reciters (*qari* or *qaria*) would prepare to compete in the practiced, melodious *mujawwad* style, illustrating their mastery of rhythm and pronunciation according to guidelines known as *tajwid*. While the main program of the MTQ is to judge the skill of solo reciters performing in turn, there are countless activities that buttress this event. Vendors sell refreshments near the stadium, public figures deliver speeches, youth groups conduct processions and raise the Indonesian flag, and school groups perform *seni musik Islam*, or Islamic music/arts, in between recitation sessions and as part of the opening and closing ceremonies. The MTQ, though its purpose lies in assessment of Qur'anic recitation which, as sacred word, many would argue is a category beyond music, nonetheless becomes a critical site of musical and embodied expressions of piety via the Islamic arts (Rasmussen 2010).

This article contributes to scholarship on Indonesia's MTQ phenomena by considering the role of choreography in the opening ceremony at West Sumatra's provincial level competitions in 2019 and 2021 (in the cities of Solok and Padangpanjang, respectively). Choreographed by Minang scholar-practitioner, Susas Rita Loravianti, *Menghimpun Cahaya* (Gathering Light, 2019) and *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan* (Pilgrimage to the City of Rain's Prayer Hall, 2021) are categorized as *tari massal*, referring to large-scale music and dance productions typically performed for government occasions. This term is often conferred because of the large number of performers (typically over two hundred), its length (30-40 minutes), and its narrative purpose that is tied to a specific place and time. *Tari massal* are a form of dance drama, narrating a carefully selected story that positions the main event to follow—which is, in our case is West Sumatra's competition of Qur'anic recitation. Given the high stakes of the province-level MTQ for competing reciters and their local communities (the winners ascend to represent West Sumatra in the National MTQ in the in-between years), Loravianti's choreography represents far more than entertainment. These productions lay down a performative claim that positions Minangkabau (West Sumatran) *Islam as Islam*: 'legitimate, historically grounded, and reflective of simultaneous local, national, and transnational Muslim ways of being.'

We consider these two performances (particularly their dates and locations) as significant, as during the interim year, 2020, the Indonesian 28th National MTQ was also held in West Sumatra, marking only the second time the larger MTQ came to West Sumatra since the competition began at the national level in 1968 (the first time was in 1983). The

West Sumatran competitions in 2019 and 2021, therefore, provide essential layering for understanding how West Sumatra was presented on the local and national stage before and after the monumental 2020 national event, including the role that choreography (alongside acts of participation and witnessing) plays in shaping this perception. We aim to illustrate how *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan* offer a means to decolonize the epistemology of Indonesian state-dominant Islam and of global Islam by emphasizing local and culturally rooted ways of knowing, remembering, and historicizing Islam in West Sumatra. In foregrounding Minangs forms of movement like *pencak silek* (martial arts), *indang* (a synchronized, seated group dance), and *tabuah* (barrel drums) and in elevating stories of local historical figures, these two *tari massal* reconstitute ongoing perceptions of the MTQ as a religious site, of piety as performance, and of modernity as negotiated. In reclaiming local histories from epistemic erasure, these performances resist homogenization on both national and religious grounds.

Choreography, we argue, emerges as not merely representational but as constitutive, a site where power, tradition, and identity (of choreographer, performer, and witness) are actively negotiated. Rather than peripheral to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia, the performing arts become central to understanding Muslim modernities and decolonial possibilities, and it is critical that we also engage with the role of choreography in shaping these understandings. Our use of decolonization in relation to the performing arts speaks to Asia as methodological framework (Chen 2010), especially as we invite reimagination of the ideas motivating terms like “modern” or “contemporary” dance in West Sumatra along what Ananya Chatterjea calls a “South-South” axis (2020). Prioritizing horizontal knowledge structures that clarify the vision of choreographer, we aim to think carefully about the construction of “tradition” at a political and religious event like the MTQ, and to advocate for performance as a critical site where Minangkabau artists define their relationship to the past, present, and future of Muslim cultural identity.

Methodology

This study builds upon performance ethnography from the West Sumatra MTQ opening ceremonies in 2019 and 2021, including participant observation and video analysis of recordings captured during both events. Additionally, the presence and vocality of Loravianti, the choreographer of both dances, is highly significant not only for this article but for the wider field of performance studies. Choreography needs not be spoken for by the eyes of others alone; here, we engage with collaborative autoethnography and choreography as methods for decolonial performance studies.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that positions the researcher’s lived experience, embodied knowledge, and reflexive engagement as critical sites of knowledge production, rather than as methodological limitations. As Chang (2008) emphasizes, autoethnography moves beyond autobiographical narrative by centering analysis on personal and participatory experience, making it well-suited to performance studies where meaning emerges through bodies, affect, and relational encounter. In our study, autoethnography enables a more situated mode for understanding participation, witnessing, and proximity shape interpretation.

This article extends autoethnographic inquiry through collaborative autoethnography, an approach to research and writing that emphasizes ethical relationality and shared responsibility in the production of knowledge (Lapadat 2017). Rather than viewing collaboration as supplementary, this approach centers exchange, negotiation, and co-reflection as part of the research process. Here, the sustained conversations between the co-authors form a core component of our analytical process and intervention—choreographic intent, artistic process, and embodied cultural knowledge are not the context, but rather the material for research.

As co-authors, we have co-constructed our understanding of the MTQ performances over the course of seven years, a period that included fieldwork and everyday practice in West Sumatra as well as sustained dialogue across oceans between Indonesia and the United States (with thanks to WhatsApp and YouTube). Engaging choreography and collaboration in this way, we aim to contribute to conversations around decolonizing performance studies, particularly as relates to non-Western performance traditions (where practitioners are more often placed as objects of study rather than contributors/authors). Instead of choreography being interpreted from the outside, our approach reframes the act of choreographing as an act of theorizing, drawing inspiration from recent scholarship that positions performance-making as theory-producing practice (Chatterjea et al. 2022). It follows that we are interested in choreography and performance as method and not in the valuative perception of these performances, although many scholars have persuasively shown that audience reception and opinion actively shape performative trajectories (Daniels 2013).

Choreography emerges as a site of both physical and intellectual labor, where dominant academic constructions of culture, modernity, and the nation-state are provincialized in favor of localized ways of knowing, making, and narrating the past. As *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* show, choreography may be understood as a form of “situated testimony” (Sears 2013) wherein the affective, emotional traces of history (those difficult to render in text), are witnessed against the political and colonial structures that claim authority over the past and present. This approach to performance is informed by Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as Method* (2010), which calls upon decolonization not as a critique but as a practice, one of shifting reference points that places Asia in relation to Asia as opposed to the assumed “Western” hegemony. Asia, therefore, is a generative space of theorization, in connection to localized and inter-Asian modes of comparison and analysis.

Applied to performance studies, Asia as method offers an alternative for representation and theorization. Performance practices become a source of theoretical insight emerging from their own historical, political, and cultural conditions. In recent scholarship, decolonial choreography has been imagined as a space of co-resistance—collective, place-aware, and accountable (Kelly et al. 2023). While writing from the position of decolonial counter-eugenic political critique of Canada’s ongoing erasure of indigenous peoples, Kelly et al. (2023) explore “the power of the body and its movements to bring new possibilities for non-normative life into the world.” Centering respect for difference, “choreographing co-resistance” affirmed modes of embodiment without assimilation or the imposition of normative standards. While the focus of this article is quite distinct from Kelly et al.’s study, the power behind choreography as co-resistance is pertinent. Within the set standards of the highly visible MTQ opening ceremony, performers uphold an image

of national Islamic identity—one that is at once deemed ‘pious’ and ‘modern.’ It is also one that is determined by and through the body, and subject to evaluative judgement through a live audience—both in-person and virtual. As *tari massal*, uniformity and coherence are essential for the choreographer’s vision to be actualized. At the same time, with over one hundred dancers on an expansive field, individual non-conformity is an anticipated slippage.

In what follows, *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* are discussed as two moments of large narrative performance. These are moments that are generative of local knowledge production through strategic conformity with an assumed national standard just as much as through creative resistance in favor of Minang-specific modes of being Muslim. We engage with existing scholarship on the performance of piety through sound and the body in motion, an important arena that contextualizes the recurring MTQ as a high-stakes performance of national becoming. In discussing *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* themselves, our aim is to connect the narrative arc of each performance alongside its choreographic and visual structure. The conclusion reflects upon the 2019 and 2021 choreographies as critical buttresses to the 2020 National MTQ event, illustrating the interplay between local and national performative imaginaries.

Sounding and Choreographing Islam

Experiences of the MTQ are predicated upon sound. While countless activities enliven the multi-day competition, it is the high regard that practicing Muslims place upon the sounds of the Qur’an that form the backbone for these much-anticipated events. Those who compete in the MTQ have undergone years of training to recite passages from the Qur’an in the practiced, melodious *mujawwad* style that has been popularized and widely adapted in Indonesia through the efforts of Egypt’s recording arts industry and their preeminent reciters in the 1960s (Rasmussen 2005). The melodic aspects of Qur’anic recitation are required to be improvised, based on individual skill and aesthetic desires (Al-Faruqi 1980, 1985). That such improvisation is thus inherently individualized makes the act of recitation unique, with each reciter cultivating their own sound.

Eisenlohr’s *Sounding Islam* (2018) conceptualizes sound as an active, embodied practice through which religious presence, affect, and ethical relations are produced. Rather than treating sound as representational or symbolic, Eisenlohr emphasizes the making of sound as a form of social action that generates sonic atmospheres (affective environments that orient bodies, attention, and modes of listening). The voice as sound emerges as relational and disciplined (through training, mediation, and ethical norms); it is also amplified and circulatory (via technology that extends sound outwards) (see also Hirschkind 2009). Recent work on sounds of/across the Indian Ocean considers the role of sound in articulating oceanic belonging, a relationship of circulation and encounter with geographically distant locales (Sykes and Byl 2023). Within the context of Qur’anic recitation in Indonesia, the performance of sound represents an expression of individuality set to a much broader, transregional network of participation. Sound becomes illustrative of an awareness of the styles, affects, and sonic atmospheres that influence the production of Qur’an recitation as performance in different parts of the Muslim world.

From the 1960s onwards, Indonesia witnessed the institutionalization of a Qur'anic recitation competition system, aided by the Qur'anic idea of "competing in goodness" alongside a national cultivation of Islamic arts during this period (Gade 2004). Gade (2002), Rasmussen (2010), and Frishkopf (2023) illustrate the varying ways in which timbral and tonal variations of Qur'anic recitation set aside local sonic cultures in favor of Egyptian; and later Saudi, recitational styles and melodies, in response to both the rise in Egypt's recording industry and the advent of global Qur'anic recitation competitions. Such considerations are essential to the framing of Indonesia's MTQ competitions. When recitation styles shift away from local qualities to embrace constructions of a global Muslim sound, we must ask how the performances that support the MTQ, such as Loravianti's choreographies, are employed to shape an image of normative Islam. While *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* make strong claims that resist homogenization, they simultaneously perform to a nationalized standard and ideal.

Shifting from sound to performing bodies, Timothy Daniels' work on piety—the ways individuals involved in the arts (via production, consumption, and mediation) engage, negotiate, and contest notions of normative piety as coded by religious and political figures—is particularly generative because it explores the concept of agency. The arts, performing artists, and arts supporters cannot exist at the sidelines of socio-politico-religious debates; instead, they are at the center of negotiating and contesting what it means to be (and look) Muslim in the public sphere (Daniels 2013). Looking closely at public discourse surrounding the dancing icon Inul Daratista, Daniels explores normative and divergent pieties that are necessarily mediated through performance in the public sphere, popular culture, and media representation. Musical and performance behavior is an arena regulated by socialized expectations of gender and sexuality that simultaneously provides the means for reinforcing, defining, or even subverting gender identities (Koskoff 2014). This dynamic is visible in the Indonesian performing arts, where many traditions also carry the weight of bearing Islamic ideals of ethics, aesthetics, and identity on local and national scales.

Scholarship on the construction of Muslim modernities provides a useful foundation for understanding the ethical and aesthetic stakes of *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau*. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship urges a decoupling of the notion of modernity and mobility from a distinct European trajectory (Chakrabarty 2008; Subrahmanyam 2012). Engseng Ho (2006) shows how conventional understandings of modernity have a Eurocentric bias that is linked to the rise of the nation-state, organizing the decolonized world after World War II along varying stages of "development" or "progress." The study of global modernities, rather, focuses on patterns of circulation that characterized the realms of Asia well before European interference. In viewing debates of modernity alongside histories of Islam, Talal Asad (1986) argues that Islam is far from a fixed belief or cultural system but a discursive tradition, one that is historically contingent and defined by the political and colonial conditions imposed upon it. Asad also argues that Western modernity produces non-Western religion as something to be regulated, tolerated, or excluded, built upon an ideal of secularism (2003). Yet rather than static or ruptured tradition, Muslim practices are reconfigured under conditions of the modern (like the nation-state, political and legal systems, etc.). Like Asad, Saba Mahmood questions the assumption that secularism neutralizes religion, considering instead how secularism operates as a social arrangement that marginalizes religious and gender subjectivities (2005). Her study considers how ethical

reform practices, such as non-political religious gatherings, nonetheless upset the social imagination of secular modernity, bringing into question the universal applicability of liberal ideals and their imperialist undertones.

The *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ) in Indonesia is an important site to evaluate the intersection of religion and politics in social life. The large MTQ events become part of a process of political patronage in the broader realm of Islamic arts competitions, a “festivalization of religion” that reflects and responds to the postcolonial nation-state (Rasmussen 2010). Indonesian scholars have examined the MTQ as a modern institutionalization and nationalization of Qur'anic recitation, one that integrates *dakwah*, aesthetic and embodied discipline, and state-sponsored festivalization through performances of modern nationalism (Safei 2020; Jannah 2016). Others document the choreographic journeys of traditional performing arts to accommodate festival productions such as the MTQ, notably scholars writing from within the context of Institut Seni Indonesia Padangpanjang in West Sumatra (Seriati et al. 2020). Together, these voices reveal how the MTQ functions as a site where ethical and political subjects are made; the experiences and practices of the MTQ shape religious and national identity in democratic Indonesia.

As performances that opened the 2019 and 2021 West Sumatra MTQ, *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* are deeply embedded in the MTQ festivalization and nationalization of religion. At the same time, these competitions were held at the province-level, anticipating the National MTQ in the years that followed. These two *tari massal* are therefore uniquely positioned to reflect Minangkabau ways of relating between body, religion, and the state. In Loravianti's selection of narratives steeped in Minang Muslim cultural history and identity, these *tari massal* set the audible and visual tone for the days of competition ahead.

Borrowing Christopher Small's framework of “musicking” (1998), Loravianti's choreography emerges as a unique space involving music-making, listening, and dancing that orients attention not towards the object but on the inter-relational networks at play. With hundreds of dancers moving and relating in each performance, one's attention cannot be focused on singular expression. It is the collective that matters, and with the combined power of beating drums, chanted phases, and body configurations across a large field, the audience is drawn in to participate through their own spontaneous shouts or to imagine themselves out on the field. Rather than abstracted symbols, Loravianti's choreography invites a lived experience of communal participation, a deeply significant Minang cultural value. In centering Minang histories and traditions, Loravianti positions Minang Islam as integral to cultural practice; each is informed and shaped by the other. Recent research from Indonesian scholars (Mariana et al. 2024; Sari 2024) examines the *adat-syarak* philosophy so deeply embedded within Minang society,

<i>Adat basandi Syarak</i>	‘Custom rests on Islamic law’
<i>Syarak basandi Kitabullah</i>	‘Islamic law rests on the Qur'an and sunnah’
<i>Syarak mangato</i>	‘Islamic law speaks’
<i>Adat memakai</i>	‘Custom acts’

These works help to contextualize *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* as choreographies that are deeply invested in celebrating the values of the local community as part of important national discourses around what constitutes Islamic culture and tradition, and for whom. Given the stakes of large festivals such as the MTQ, these choreographies lay down a performative claim that asserts Minangkabau Muslim identity as capable of speaking across local, national, and transnational boundaries. Below, we discuss *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* in turn, aiming to connect their narrative arcs along the lines of inquiry presented here.

Menghimpun Cahaya (2019)

The 2019 West Sumatra MTQ opened in Solok on a Saturday evening in June, two weeks after the Idul Fitri holiday marking the end of Ramadan. It was already dark and the air hung heavily with humidity and tobacco smoke. Marked by the interlocking patterns of the *talempong* (small kettle gongs), roughly two hundred and fifty dancers flowed across the expansive Merdeka Field, their figures illuminated by bright white stadium lights. This *tari massal* featured 50 students from the nearby Institut Seni Indonesia Padangpanjang and 200 from local Solok high schools.

A line of large barrel-shaped *tabuah*, each one supported on a wooden stand, frames the front of the field closest to the audience. Sometimes called *tabuh* elsewhere in Indonesia, the *tabuah* are large ceremonial drums similar in appearance and function to the Malay *beduk* and Javanese *bedhug*. Suspended from wooden frames outside of mosques throughout Minangkabau lands, the *tabuah* historically was struck with wooden mallets to announce the Muslim call to prayer. An installation decorates the face of the *rumah gadang* building at the far end of the field, the iconic Minangkabau architecture that symbolizes the curvature of a boat or the horns of a water buffalo, depending on who you ask. Flashing lights and images project onto the *rumah gadang*, sometimes displaying the Muslim term of worship *subhanallah* (glory be to God) and at other times images of camels, palm trees, and figures in hooded gowns.

The dancers—the young men wearing loose white tunics, sarong, and checkered cloth, and the young women wearing *baju kurung* with black spandex turtle-necks underneath to cover any exposed skin—glide onto the field balancing a white ceramic plate in each hand and a candle atop their heads. A handful of female dancers hold woven baskets on their heads in place of a candle, their swooping gestures mimicking the harvesting of rice. The swift, bright notes of *talempong* contrast the slower, deep tones of the airy *saluang* (bamboo flute) and the sharp pentatonic *serunai* (bamboo reed flute), altogether creating a vibrant atmosphere of Minang traditional celebratory music fitting for the MTQ's opening night. This *tari massal* employs symbols and movements associated with traditional Minang *tari piring* and *tari lilin* to narrate the history of Islam in Minangkabau, the traditional lands belonging to the Minang people of western Sumatra.

Loravianti, the choreographer, imagined *Menghimpun Cahaya* as a performative rendering of Islam's history in Solok, the city where the 2019 MTQ took place. Considering this *tari massal* a “grand narrative” of local Muslim history and custom, she based her choreography on the traditional arts and everyday life of Solok. The dancers began with a procession illuminated by torches and candles called *suluak*, marking an invocation to

ritual journeys that situate Islam within local cosmologies. This creates a rather auspicious feeling at the opening and draws the audience and performers together in following the light of the torches. As *Menghimpun Cahaya* transitions from the more somber procession to the lively *surau* (Minang Islamic assembly building), focus shifts to communal piety and collective practices. Here, collaborative movements are embodied through *silat* (martial arts), *indang* (seated line music/dance with interlocking body movements), and *tari piring* (an energetic dance of balancing and twirling plates), all of which are group participatory practices that frequently engage bodily contact. They require mindful communication and interaction with one's fellow dancers, both for safety and for the completion of complex movements and rhythms. Loravianti selected these movements to represent the communal nature of Islamic piety and the diverse methods of learning at the *surau*. Continuing this theme of community, the surrounding dancers depict scenes from everyday agrarian life such as harvesting rice and tilling fields.

The final two sections involve the practices of the *anak nagari* (local community) and *gotong royong* (mutual assistance and community cooperativism). These scenes show the lived experiences of Solok as it developed its traditional and religious life, witnessed through the dancers acting out scenarios of administrative formation and local governance. This component, brought to life in the circle formation of *randai* (folk theater), is illustrative of Minang methods of oral tradition. Group participation remains essential, as all players take a role in narrating the story from within the circle and along its edge. Finally, the performance is brought to a resonant conclusion with the force of forty drummers beating the *tabuah* in unison at the front of the stage arena. This energetic activity remains collaborative, requires deep listening, and heightens audience perception of the physical exertion taking place on stage. It embodies the effort and hard work behind building and maintaining community in Solok. Placed in its context as the opening to the West Sumatra MTQ, it suggests the strength and resilience of the local community in the efforts of nation-building, in becoming part of a larger whole grounded in shared Muslim belief and values. It is an attempt to connect Solok's historical trajectory with its contemporary position representing West Sumatra and, symbolically, broader Indonesia.

Menghimpun Cahaya begins with depictions of pastoral West Sumatran life that slowly transition into scenes of Minang Islamic practice in the home and *surau*, documenting community efforts to establish the city of Solok pre- and post-independence. As the performance transitions to address large-scale community building and identity construction, it is clear this dance choreography is equally impressive in its scale as it is in thematic scope. Sonic and sartorial cues—the *talempong*, clothing, the ceramic *piring* balanced on twirling hands, etc.—suggest a permanence or durability of local Minang culture throughout the performance. Yet, if we recall the cloth installation behind the dancers, with its shifting display of hooded figures and camels walking across sand dunes studded with palm trees, there is a contrasting layer to this narrative. The pairing of sights and sounds that characterize West Sumatra with the visual cues that symbolize the Arab world may at first appear as a geographical contradiction, or perhaps a declaration of synonymy between indigenous Minang and what might be viewed as “mainstream” Muslim identities; however, the privileging of local Minang performing arts as Islamic arts (permissible and celebrated in the opening ceremony of a competitive Islamic event like the MTQ) works to shift a relationship with power. It emphasizes local and cultural rooted

ways of knowing, remembering, and historicizing Islam in the specific context of Solok in West Sumatra, signaling that local knowledge production is just as significant as global discourses of Islamic identity. In this light, Loravianti's choreography can be understood as a celebration not so much of local culture's persistence per se, but rather of local culture as Islamic culture. This opening performance is an expression of dual, mutually reinforced identities; to be Minang means to be Muslim. It is a performance of becoming the center of Islam for themselves and from home.

Picture 1. Photo documentation of *Menghimpun Cahaya*



Source: Author

Picture 2. Photo documentation of *Menghimpun Cahaya*



Source: Author

Picture 3. Photo documentation of *Menghimpun Cahaya*



Source: Author

Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan (2021)

The 2021 West Sumatra MTQ opened in Padangpanjang on a Saturday evening in November, a time when Indonesia was still grappling with the health and social disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Like *Menghimpun Cahaya*, Loravianti imagined *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan* as a performative historical narrative that traces Islam's local history. In this production, however, the storyline also addresses the founding of the city of Padangpanjang in the early 19th century and its transformation into a contemporary center for Islamic education and cultural innovation alike. This *tari massal*, performed by roughly 50 students from Institut Seni Indonesia Padangpanjang and around 200 local high school students, emerges as a performative archive celebrating the shared histories of Islam and the performing arts in Padangpanjang.

The *tari massal* begins with patches of darkness and a feeling of restlessness stretching across the field; soon, performers emerge in a fighting stance. General chaos breaks out and we learn via the voiceover that a dispute is brewing between neighboring towns over the location of the Friday market. Already, *Ziarah Surau* is immediately quite different from the quiet *suluak* ritual marking the entrance of *Menghimpun Cahaya*. At last, an esteemed figure arrives to encourage deliberation (*musyawarah*) instead of bloodshed. This elder man, Tuanku Pamansiangan, proclaims, "Do not fight over short-term trade gains" (*janganlah kita bertikai karena mengejar keuntungan niaga sesaat*); his intervention results in the local communities agreeing upon the town of Padangpanjang to be the equal meeting ground for their market. This resolution, marked through dance, emphasizes the importance of consensus from the very beginning of Padangpanjang's history. Consensus echoes as an essential foundation for the Minangs philosophy discussed earlier, "Custom is based in Islamic law, and Islamic law is based in the Qur'an" (*Adat basandi Syarak, Syarak basandi Kitabullah*).

Ziarah Surau continues with the story of one of Padangpanjang's earliest *surau*, founded in 1895, an important event marked by performers entering the field bearing a large mosque dome. Education reform dominates the narrative at this juncture, with

performers enacting roles of students in religious centers, leading to the founding of the historical Diniyah School in 1915, a key institution of Padangpanjang's Islamic educational landscape. With the passing of each era (encapsulating world wars and the manifestation of Indonesia's independence), the significance of the *surau* in Padangpanjang remains of central focus; the performance itself forms a kind of documentary, signaling tremendous social change whilst the *surau* remains a constant, silent witness.

Finally, a beloved cultural figure emerges from the documentarian narrative, Huriah Adam, who herself learned *silat* and musical arts in the *surau* as a child in Padangpanjang. As she grows up, she begins to imagine the future possibilities for the traditions passed down to her. She would ultimately be known as a champion for women's roles in the performing arts and for defining "contemporary" Minangkabau dance, drawing extensively from her *silat* practice from the *surau*. In imagining "contemporary" as one inherently informed by tradition (drawing from *silat*, Islamic teachings, and Minang oral traditions), Adam pioneered career pathways for female performing artists who followed in her wake. Her reimagining of the "contemporary" category invigorates locally informed praxis in conceptualizing the "modern" and represents culturally specific modes of local and national subjectivities. Huriah Adam's presence, both on stage and in the Minang imaginary, serves to disrupt patriarchal scripts that marginalize female performers, celebrating Huriah's critical role in shaping Minangkabau cultural tradition for the generations to come.

Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan offers an alternative for how history is passed down. In privileging the *surau* as the center for knowledge production (a center that maintains presence and consistency as the stabilizing backdrop against historical change and instability), Loravianti complicates colonial and postcolonial hierarchies that privilege Western education and a centralized government. Viewing educational and cultural growth first and foremost from within existing Minang institutions, *Ziarah Surau* charts a regional history that centers structures of governance, education, religion, and cultural production on its own terms, asserting individuality against the tendency to homogenize under the nation-state.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for national festivals to stage a linear trajectory of modernity and progress, one that legitimizes the borders of the nation-state. In Indonesia, the national cultural policy often promotes a vision of predestined unity through diversity, staging large-scale festivals that integrate regional traditions into a homogenized national aesthetic. While these productions celebrate inclusivity, they risk obscuring local epistemologies, privileging standardized choreographic vocabularies and universal Islamic symbols over culturally grounded forms. For example, the interim year of 2020 hosted the Indonesian National MTQ in West Sumatra. While the MTQ opening ceremony acknowledges local histories, the competition brought in dancers, choreographers, and perspectives from outside the region, suggestive of a pan-Indonesian, and perhaps even transnational aesthetic, with a focus on interregional connectivity over regional specificity.

Against this backdrop, Loravianti's *tari massal* are more than mere dances. Taken together, these choreographies articulate a decolonial re-centering of Islamic knowledge, history, and cultural authority within *alam Minangkabau*, or Minang worlds. In

Menghimpun Cahaya, the privileging of local Minang performing arts as explicitly Islamic (permissible and celebrated within a competitive religious event) reconfigures relationships to power by foregrounding locally rooted ways of knowing, remembering, and historicizing Islam in West Sumatra. Local knowledge production is asserted as equally significant to global discourses of Islamic identity, and Minang culture is not merely preserved alongside Islam but affirmed as Islamic culture itself. Extending this intervention, *Ziarah Surau Kota Hujan* offers an alternative model of historical transmission through privileging the space of the *surau* as site of religious, cultural, and artistic learning amidst social and political change. By centering the *surau* as social, cultural, and religious space, Loravianti places pressure upon colonial and postcolonial hierarchies that privilege “modernity,” instead charting a regional history articulated on its own terms. Across both works, choreography becomes a site for asserting localized Islamic authority, complicating universalist narratives of the nation-state, and affirming Minangkabau cultural and religious life as a generative center for, rather than a peripheral response to, Islamic practice.

Our consideration of *Menghimpun Cahaya* and *Ziarah Surau* emerged from a place of collaboration and autoethnographic exploration. Paying attention to choreography as part of the larger MTQ institution gave life to questions about how power, tradition and identity are actively negotiated and who is recognized as taking part in these negotiations. With sustained collaboration, we hope to continue exploring these questions and the decolonial possibilities of the performing arts.

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