



Aer Ulak Ritual as a Source of Inspiration for Dance Creation in Aceh Tamiang

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ABSTRACT

Ritual *Aer Ulak* sebagai sumber inspirasi penciptaan tari: sebuah tradisi masyarakat Aceh Tamiang. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menghasilkan (1) deskripsi naratif mengenai ritual *Aer Ulak* dari Aceh Tamiang; dan (2) karya tari kreasi baru yang sumber penciptaannya terinspirasi oleh deskripsi naratif ritual *Aer Ulak* tersebut. Objek penelitian ini adalah bentuk-bentuk gerak tari, sedangkan subjek penelitiannya adalah pakar tari Aceh Tamiang, Rezky Kurnia Putri. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui observasi. Analisis data dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik analisis deskriptif kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa berbagai pose gerak tari serta kombinasi gerakan yang membentuk rangkaian gerak tari kreasi baru telah berhasil diwujudkan. Pose-pose tari yang telah mengalami distorsi dan abstraksi dari sumber inspirasi, rangkaian gerak dalam karya tari yang dikembangkan, desain kostum, serta desain iringan musik, semuanya selaras dengan karakteristik sumber inspirasinya. Penciptaan tari *Aer Ulak* terinspirasi oleh tradisi masa lampau yang kini telah punah. Tari *Aer Ulak* diciptakan oleh Rezky Kurnia Putri pada tahun 2018 dengan mengusung tema tradisional. Istilah *Aer Ulak* dalam bahasa Tamiang berarti "Air yang Kembali" (*Returning Water*). Tarian ini menggambarkan serangkaian proses dalam tradisi *Aer Ulak*, yaitu sebuah ritual yang dilakukan masyarakat untuk memperoleh pertanda dari makhluk gaib yang diyakini menghuni Sungai Tamiang, baik berupa tanda akan datangnya bencana maupun kemakmuran bagi desa tersebut.

Keywords: Dance Creation, Source of Inspiration, *Aer Ulak* Tradition

ABSTRAK

Salah satu syarat kelulusan mahasiswa adalah menulis skripsi. Pemilihan tema dan pembimbing yang tepat sangat penting untuk hasil penelitian yang berkualitas. Penelitian ini menganalisis faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi pemilihan topik dan pembimbing skripsi mahasiswa dengan pendekatan kualitatif. Partisipan yang terlibat dalam penelitian ini terdiri dari 11 mahasiswa angkatan 2022 tanpa membedakan gender dan latar belakang sosial lainnya dan dipilih secara purposive, dengan kriteria telah selesai seminar proposal. Proses pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang memungkinkan partisipan untuk memberikan jawaban yang mendalam serta menjelaskan perspektif mereka mengenai pemilihan topik dan pemilihan pembimbing skripsi. Analisis data menggunakan analisis tematik yang bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola yang muncul dari respon partisipan. Hasil penelitian ini, menemukan bahwa preferensi pemilihan topik dan pembimbing skripsi mahasiswa Sosiologi FISIP Universitas Riau sangat dipengaruhi oleh berbagai faktor, termasuk relevansi isu sosial, latar belakang pembimbing, dan pendekatan bimbingan yang baik. Mahasiswa cenderung memilih topik-topik yang sedang trendy sesuai dengan perkembangan terkini, serta menginginkan dukungan dari dosen yang memiliki kedekatan emosional dengan mahasiswa selain itu yang berpengalaman di bidang yang mereka pilih.

Kata kunci: : Kreasi Tari, Sumber Inspirasi, Tradisi *Aer Ulak*



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1. Introduction

In the past, dance practices were generally performed within the context of sacred events or as part of customary obligations in community life. However, with the passage of time and the development of society, dance performances are no longer solely associated with ritual purposes but are also based on aesthetic awareness and artistic considerations. Today, dance continues to develop and serves various functions in society, including as a form of entertainment, as part of religious ceremonies, and as a component of traditional rituals.

This phenomenon is also reflected in the diversity of dance traditions in Aceh. The dances in Aceh demonstrate a wide range of forms, meanings, and aesthetic values that emerge through the creative processes of choreographers in developing and formulating dance works.

Jacqueline Smith explains that ideas for dance creation may arise from various sources that are later developed through movement exploration. These sources of inspiration may include daily life experiences, folklore, legends, rituals, or social conditions within society. According to Smith, choreographers have the freedom to interpret such sources creatively, resulting in dance works that possess both aesthetic value and symbolic meaning.

This concept can also be observed in the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance. This dance work originated from inspiration drawn from a past tradition that has now become extinct. The *Aer Ulak* Dance was created by Rezky Kurnia Putri in 2018 with a theme rooted in local tradition. The term *Aer Ulak* in the Tamiang language means “Returning Water.” The dance represents a sequence of processes within the *Aer Ulak* tradition, a ritual carried out by the community to obtain signs from supernatural beings believed to inhabit the Tamiang River. These signs are interpreted as indications of either impending disaster or the arrival of prosperity for the village community.

Catherine Bell views ritual as a social practice referred to as ritualization. According to Bell, rituals are not merely symbolic actions but cultural strategies used by communities to construct and maintain structures of power, identity, and social meaning. Bell’s perspective emphasizes that rituals should be understood within the broader context of social practices and power relations within society.

In the creative process, Rezky Kurnia Putri acts not only as a choreographer but also as a performer, observer, and creator who contributes significantly to the formation of the work. The creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance is strongly influenced by the choreographer’s experiences, knowledge, and ability to absorb, reflect upon, and transform various creative ideas into a dance composition.

Based on this background, this research focuses on examining the source of inspiration behind the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance by Rezky Kurnia Putri. The interest in this research object arises from the distinctive characteristics of its movements, which combine elements of traditional dance with modern touches, resulting in a dynamic and engaging performance. Furthermore, the expressive movements presented in the dance evoke a mystical atmosphere that can be directly experienced by the audience during the performance.

2. Literature Review

Studies on the process of dance creation cannot be separated from previous research that discusses creativity, inspiration, and the relationship between cultural traditions and the creation of artistic works. Various studies indicate that dance works often emerge from the process of transforming experiences, knowledge, and cultural phenomena, which are later expressed in the form of movement compositions with aesthetic value.

The creation of dance begins with the presence of a stimulus that generates creative ideas for a choreographer [1]. These stimuli may originate from various sources, such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or ideational stimuli related to social and cultural phenomena. Through processes of exploration, improvisation, and composition, these stimuli are then developed into structured movements that possess artistic value.

Ideas for dance creation can arise from various sources of inspiration, including everyday life experiences, folklore, traditions, rituals, and social conditions. These sources serve as the foundation for choreographers to develop creative ideas that are eventually expressed in the form of dance compositions with symbolic and aesthetic meanings [2].

Furthermore, in cultural studies, dance works often originate from traditions that exist within a community. These traditions become sources of inspiration for artists in creating works that represent cultural values. In the creative process, traditions are not always preserved in their original form but often undergo reinterpretation and creative transformation, resulting in new dance forms that remain connected to their

cultural origins.

Based on these studies, it can be understood that the process of dance creation results from the interaction between the choreographer's personal experiences, cultural sources of inspiration, and creative processes involving movement exploration and development. Therefore, research on the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance by Rezky Kurnia Putri is important in order to examine how an extinct tradition can be revived through a creative process in the form of a new dance work.

3. Method

This study employs a descriptive method with a narrative approach. The descriptive method aims to systematically and factually describe the phenomenon being studied, while the narrative approach is used to explain in depth the processes and experiences related to the research object. Through this method, the researcher attempts to describe in detail the creative process behind the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance by Rezky Kurnia Putri based on data obtained from the field.

Narrative research is a qualitative research approach that focuses on collecting and organizing stories or experiences of individuals, which are then analyzed and interpreted by the researcher [3]. Through this approach, a person's experiences can be understood more comprehensively because they are presented in the form of narratives that describe processes, events, and the meanings contained within them [4].

In line with this view, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative research is a method used to understand human experiences through stories conveyed by individuals involved in particular events. In this approach, the researcher plays a role in collecting, organizing, and interpreting these experiences into a meaningful description.

The descriptive method in qualitative research is used to systematically, factually, and accurately describe phenomena by examining facts and the relationships among the phenomena being studied [5]. In the context of narrative description, the collected data are then arranged in the form of a story-like explanation so that a process or event can be explained more deeply [6].

The narrative approach in this research is used to reveal the stories, experiences, and processes experienced by the choreographer in creating the dance work. The data obtained are then organized into a coherent narrative to provide a clear description of the background, stages of the creative process, and the factors influencing the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance.

Data collection techniques in this study include observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine the presentation of the dance and the elements contained within it, such as movements, floor patterns, costumes, and musical accompaniment. Interviews were conducted with the choreographer as the main informant to obtain information regarding the background of the creation, sources of inspiration, and the creative process involved in producing the *Aer Ulak* Dance. Documentation was used to complement the research data in the form of photographs, videos, and archives related to the dance work.

The collected data were analyzed using narrative descriptive analysis techniques, namely by organizing the data, classifying relevant information, and interpreting the data systematically to produce a clear explanation of the creative process involved in the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance. Through this method, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how an extinct tradition can be revived through the creative process of dance creation.

4. Result and Discussion

Aer Ulak Dance is one of the traditional art forms that developed within the Tamiang ethnic community residing in the Kuala Simpang area, Aceh Tamiang Regency. Initially, this dance was associated with divination rituals practiced by the local community and was performed exclusively by seven male dancers. The musical accompaniment for the *Aer Ulak* Dance consists of several instruments, including a keyboard, two Malay drums, a violin, bamba, ketipung, and an accordion. The dancers wear predominantly black costumes consisting of a shirt, trousers, and a pointed headcloth known as *tengkuluk*. In addition, the performance also utilizes properties such as *perasap* and *lancang* as dramatic supporting elements.

In the presentation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance during the Aceh Cultural Week (PKA) in 2018, the choreographer Rezky Kurnia Putri introduced several artistic developments in terms of costume and properties. The male dancers continued to wear black costumes combined with a *tengkuluk* and dark-colored songket. However, female dancers were also included in the choreography as a form of creative innovation. The female dancers wore long cloth costumes with brown-toned makeup intended to represent the shadows of supernatural

beings believed to inhabit the Tamiang River. The properties used in the performance included ritual offerings consisting of *upeh* from the areca palm, flowers, and incense. Additionally, a *terap* equipped with wheels was used as the seat for the character of Dato', allowing easier mobility of the character during the performance (Interview, September 20, 2025).

The creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance was inspired by an ancient tradition of the Tamiang community that has now become extinct. This dance was created by Rezky Kurnia Putri in 2018 with a theme rooted in local tradition. Etymologically, the term *Aer Ulak* in the Tamiang language means "Returning Water." The dance represents a sequence of ritual processes carried out by the community to obtain signs from supernatural beings believed to inhabit the Tamiang River, which may indicate either impending disaster or prosperity for the village community. Information regarding the background of this dance creation was obtained through explanations from Rezky Kurnia Putri as the choreographer. In qualitative research using a narrative descriptive approach, the experiences and explanations of the main informant play a crucial role in understanding the process behind the creation of an artistic work [7].

The creation of a dance work requires a systematic creative process in order to produce movement compositions that are harmoniously aligned with musical accompaniment. Creativity serves as the primary element in generating dance works with artistic value. The creative process in dance creation consists of several stages: exploration, improvisation, evaluation, and composition. These stages provide space for choreographers to think, feel, and develop their imagination in formulating movement forms that will be presented [8]. These creative stages also served as the foundation for the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance.



Picture 1. Documentation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance of Aceh Tamiang

The exploration stage represents the initial phase of the creative process, in which possible movement ideas are explored based on the available sources of inspiration. This stage is considered complex because only a limited number of people possess a deep understanding of the *Aer Ulak* tradition, which has long been abandoned. Movement exploration was carried out by Rezky Kurnia Putri together with the dancers through regular practice sessions at the Lenggang Mude Community (LMC) studio. During this process, existing movement patterns were further developed and adapted to the needs of the performance.

The improvisation stage involves the spontaneous search and development of movement variations inspired by the cultural object being explored, namely the traditional ritual of the Tamiang community. The movements discovered in this stage were largely inspired by the stages of traditional divination rituals. These movements were then stylized and artistically processed into dance movements with aesthetic value. At this stage, Rezky Kurnia Putri also adjusted the movement composition to match the lyrics and musical accompaniment used in the performance (Interview, September 20, 2025).

The evaluation stage involves reviewing the entire sequence of movements produced through improvisation. If inconsistencies were found between movements, tempo, musical accompaniment, or transitions between sections, adjustments were made in the form of additions, reductions, or modifications of movements. This evaluation process aimed to achieve harmony between movement elements, music, and the dramatic structure of the performance.

The composition stage represents the final phase in the dance creation process, in which all movement motifs resulting from exploration, improvisation, and evaluation are arranged and structured into a cohesive choreography [9]. At this stage, all dance elements are integrated to produce a performance with a clear dramatic flow.

The elements that construct the *Aer Ulak* Dance include theme, movement, floor patterns, properties, makeup, costumes, and musical accompaniment. The theme serves as the basis for determining the direction of movement exploration as well as shaping the dynamics and dramatic aspects of the performance (Kusnadi, 2009: 8). The theme presented in the *Aer Ulak* Dance is a divination ritual aimed at reintroducing the cultural tradition of the Tamiang community through the medium of dance. The variety of movements presented in the choreography is structured based on the stages of the traditional ritual [10].

Dance movement, as the primary element of the performance, has undergone a process of stylization in order to produce certain aesthetic values. The movements in the *Aer Ulak* Dance are inspired by ancient traditions with mystical characteristics, which are then transformed into systematic dance movements, such as carrying *perasap*, lowering the *lancang*, and waiting for divine signs. In addition, floor patterns function to regulate the positions and movements of the dancers on stage, creating an organized and harmonious composition [11].

The properties used in the *Aer Ulak* Dance include ritual offerings consisting of *upeh*, flowers, coconut, eggs, bananas, and incense, as well as a *terap* used as the seat of the character Dato' [12]. Makeup functions to strengthen the character portrayal and to create a mystical atmosphere within the performance, while costumes enhance visual aesthetics and distinguish the roles of different characters. Musical accompaniment functions as an inseparable supporting element of the dance performance, as dance and music complement each other in creating an artistic unity [13].

In addition to the stages of the creative process, the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance was also influenced by several factors, including environmental factors, facilities, skills, and the identity or style of the creator [14]. Environmental factors include internal aspects such as the talent and abilities possessed by Rezky Kurnia Putri, as well as external influences affecting the creative process. Meanwhile, the availability of facilities did not pose any obstacles in the creation of this dance, as the presence of a well-equipped rehearsal space at the Lenggang Mude Community (LMC) studio and adequate musical instruments supported the arrangement of the musical accompaniment.



Picture 2. Documentation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance of Aceh Tamiang

Within the context of qualitative research using a narrative descriptive approach, the entire creative process was understood through the exploration of experiences and narratives provided by the choreographer as the main informant [15]. This approach enables the researcher to organize and interpret these creative experiences into a systematic narrative description, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance as a tradition-based artistic work.

5. Conclusion

Based on the explanation of the creative process behind the *Aer Ulak* Dance by Rezky Kurnia Putri, it can be concluded that this dance represents an artistic work that originates from the reinterpretation of an old tradition of the Tamiang community related to a divination ritual. This tradition serves as the main source of inspiration in the creation of the work, which is then reprocessed through a creative approach to produce a dance performance that possesses aesthetic value while simultaneously representing the cultural identity of the Tamiang community.

The creation process of the *Aer Ulak* Dance involves several creative stages as proposed by Hawkins, namely exploration, improvisation, evaluation, and composition. During the exploration stage, the choreographer and the dancers explore various possible movement variations inspired by the ritual traditions of the Tamiang community. The improvisation stage involves the spontaneous development of movements, which then undergo processes of stylization and adjustment to the musical accompaniment and lyrics used in the performance. The evaluation stage is carried out to review the suitability between movement, tempo, and musical accompaniment in order to achieve harmony within the performance. Finally, the composition stage becomes the concluding process in which all movement elements are arranged into a complete and unified choreographic structure.

In addition to the stages of the creative process, the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance is also influenced by several factors, including environmental factors, facilities and resources, skills, and the creator's identity. Environmental factors include the choreographer's abilities and experiences as well as the influence of the surrounding social and cultural environment. The availability of supporting facilities, such as a rehearsal studio and musical instruments, also contributes to the smooth execution of the dance creation process.

Through a narrative descriptive approach, this research is able to systematically describe the creative process involved in the creation of the *Aer Ulak* Dance. The results of the study indicate that this dance work functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as an effort to preserve and reintroduce the cultural traditions of the Tamiang community that have long been abandoned. Thus, the *Aer Ulak* Dance represents a form of cultural revitalization through the medium of dance, which is capable of re-presenting traditional values in a creative and aesthetically engaging performance.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, the research focuses solely on the *Aer Ulak* Dance within the context of the Tamiang community, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other traditional dances or cultural contexts. Second, the availability of historical and archival data is relatively limited, resulting in a reliance on interpretative analysis and oral sources. Third, the use of a descriptive qualitative approach restricts the study from incorporating comparative or interdisciplinary perspectives that could provide a broader analytical framework.

Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope of study by conducting comparative analyses with other traditional dances that share similar cultural backgrounds. In addition, the use of interdisciplinary approaches, such as anthropology, ethnocoreology, and performance studies, is encouraged to enrich the analysis. Further studies should also consider utilizing more diverse data sources, including visual archives, audiovisual documentation, and broader engagement with cultural practitioners and local communities, in order to produce more comprehensive and in-depth research findings.

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