

*Corresponding author: Jamilah,
Department of Performing Arts,
Faculty of Art and Design, Universitas
Negeri Makassar, Makassar, South
Sulawesi, Indonesia

E-mail: jamilah@unm.ac.id

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aesthetic Transformation of Zapin Dance in Malay-Javanese Cultural Perspective*

Rina Martiara¹, Robby Hidajat², Jamilah^{3*}, Nurachmy Sahnir³

¹Department of Dance, Faculty of Performing Arts, Indonesian Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

²Department of Art and Design, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

³Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Art and Design, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Abstract: This study examines the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance within the perspective of Malay-Javanese culture in the Nusantara region. The research aims to explore how the interaction between Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural elements shapes the form, meaning, and aesthetic values of Zapin dance. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using ethnocoreological methods. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with dance practitioners, direct observation of performances, and literature review. The analysis focuses on movement patterns, costumes, musical elements, and song lyrics, interpreted through a cultural and aesthetic framework. The results reveal that Zapin dance has undergone significant transformation influenced by cultural interactions along maritime trade routes. The dance demonstrates a synthesis of Arab rhythmic structures, Malay aesthetic sensibilities, and Javanese cultural expressions, which are reflected in its movement, costume design, and musical composition. The findings indicate that Zapin dance is not only an artistic performance but also a cultural medium that embodies values of identity, morality, and social harmony. This transformation reflects the dynamic process of cultural adaptation and continuity within Malay-Javanese society.

Keywords: Zapin Dance, Aesthetic Transformation, Malay Culture, Javanese Culture, Cultural Interaction

1. Introduction

The development of Zapin dance in Southeast Asia is closely linked to historical interactions between Arab and Malay cultures, particularly through maritime trade networks that flourished during the era of the Malay Sultanates in Sumatra and later expanded to the Malacca Peninsula (Laksana, 2018; Andayana, 2019). These cultural exchanges significantly contributed to the formation of Zapin as a distinctive performing art that spread across coastal societies in the Nusantara region, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and surrounding areas (Amrun, 2019). Within this context, Zapin emerged not merely as a form of entertainment but as a cultural expression shaped by religious, social, and aesthetic values. Historically, Zapin is categorized into Zapin Arab and Zapin Melayu, reflecting its dual roots in Arab cultural traditions and local Malay adaptations (Nor, 2000). The diversity of its



regional names, such as Bedana in Lampung and Dana in Jambi, further illustrates its dynamic adaptation across different cultural environments.

From an aesthetic perspective, Zapin dance represents a complex cultural synthesis involving Arab, Malay, and local Indonesian elements. This synthesis is particularly evident in the transformation of movement patterns, costume design, musical structure, and lyrical content. Previous studies have examined specific aspects of Zapin, such as its functional transformation into entertainment and aesthetic performance in Palembang (Hidajat, 2021), as well as its localized movement characteristics influenced by musical traditions such as hadrah and selawatan in Java (Flouryilia, 2020). In addition, Martiara (2018) emphasizes that Malay dance traditions, including Zapin, have not been sufficiently explored as expressions of maritime culture, indicating the need for broader analytical perspectives.

However, most existing studies tend to adopt descriptive and region-specific approaches, focusing on localized characteristics rather than examining Zapin as a transregional cultural phenomenon. Such limitations result in a lack of comprehensive understanding of how aesthetic transformation occurs through cultural interaction and diffusion across maritime networks. In fact, the widespread distribution of Zapin from the Riau Islands to the Malacca Peninsula, and further to Kalimantan, Java, Sulawesi, and even parts of the Philippines demonstrates the existence of a complex cultural exchange system that shapes its evolving aesthetic forms (Hidajat, 2021). This condition suggests that Zapin should be understood within a broader cultural framework that considers both regional diversity and intercultural interaction.

In particular, the interaction between Malay and Javanese cultures plays a crucial role in shaping the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance in Indonesia. Malay culture contributes significantly to the refinement, fluidity, and symbolic elegance of movement, while Javanese cultural elements introduce structural complexity, interpretative depth, and influences from local traditions such as pencak silat and court dance aesthetics. This interaction results in a distinctive aesthetic configuration that reflects both continuity and transformation. Despite its importance, the Malay-Javanese cultural perspective in understanding Zapin aesthetics remains underexplored in previous studies, which often emphasize either Malay or Arab influences without adequately addressing the role of Javanese cultural adaptation.

Furthermore, the relationship between Islam and performing arts provides an important conceptual framework for analyzing Zapin dance. In contemporary Muslim societies, performing arts are increasingly recognized as a medium for transmitting ethical, spiritual, and cultural values (Alagha, 2015; Ishiguro, 2023). Rather than being perceived solely as entertainment, artistic practices are understood as purposeful art that integrates moral and social dimensions within Islamic contexts. In Southeast Asia, traditional performing arts often function as a space of cultural negotiation, where Islamic values interact with local traditions in a dynamic and adaptive manner (Karim & Abdullah, 2022; Ishiguro, 2023).

Zapin dance exemplifies this process of cultural negotiation. Originating from the Arabic zafin tradition brought by Hadhrami traders, Zapin has undergone significant transformation through its integration with Malay and local Indonesian cultures (Nor, 2012). This transformation is not only visible in its performative elements but also reflects deeper processes of meaning-making and identity formation. Recent studies indicate that Malay-Islamic performing arts embody both cultural identity and religious symbolism embedded in movement, music, and performance structures (Chan et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the specific processes through which aesthetic transformation occurs particularly in relation to Malay-Javanese cultural interaction have not been sufficiently examined.

From a theoretical standpoint, this transformation can be understood through the concept of embodiment, which positions the body as a central medium for producing and transmitting cultural meaning (Csordas, 1990; Farnell, 2012). In Islamic contexts, embodiment is closely related to the concept of *adab*, which regulates bodily conduct, moral behavior, and spiritual expression (Huda, 2020; Abdullah, 2020). In Zapin dance, elements

such as controlled gestures, rhythmic footwork, modest costumes, and moral narratives in song lyrics can be interpreted as manifestations of aesthetic values that are both cultural and ethical. These elements illustrate how aesthetic transformation is not only a visual phenomenon but also an embodied cultural process.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance within a Malay-Javanese cultural perspective. Specifically, it analyzes how movement, costume, music, and lyrical elements reflect the interaction and synthesis of Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural values. By employing an ethnocoreological approach and interpretative cultural analysis (Yudiaryani, 2007), this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of Zapin dance as a dynamic cultural practice that embodies aesthetic transformation within the context of maritime Southeast Asia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Zapin Dance as a Maritime Cultural Expression

Zapin dance is widely recognized as a cultural product that developed along maritime trade routes in Southeast Asia, particularly within Malay societies. The expansion of Islamic networks and trade relations contributed significantly to the dissemination of Zapin across regions such as Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Kalimantan, Java, Sulawesi, and parts of the Philippines (Amrun, 2019; Andayana, 2019). In this context, Zapin is not only a performing art but also a representation of maritime cultural identity, reflecting the mobility and interaction of coastal communities.

Martiara (2018) argues that Malay dance traditions, including Zapin, should be understood as expressions of maritime society, where cultural forms are shaped by patterns of trade, migration, and intercultural contact. Similarly, Hidajat (2021) emphasizes that Zapin dance represents a cultural construction that emerges from social interactions within coastal communities, forming a shared identity across geographically dispersed regions. These perspectives highlight the importance of understanding Zapin within a broader cultural and historical framework rather than as a localized tradition.

2.2. Cultural Transformation and Aesthetic Adaptation

The concept of cultural transformation is central to understanding the evolution of Zapin dance. Cultural transformation refers to the process through which cultural forms change over time due to both internal dynamics and external influences. In the context of Zapin, this transformation is driven by interactions between Arab, Malay, and local Indonesian cultures, resulting in diverse aesthetic expressions.

Cultural change often occurs through processes of negotiation and adaptation, in which new elements are integrated into existing cultural systems (Geertz, 1973). This perspective is reinforced by the idea that social practices are shaped through a dynamic relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1984). Zapin dance exemplifies this dynamic process, as it continuously adapts to different cultural contexts while maintaining its core identity.

Furthermore, cultural globalization explains how cultural forms circulate and transform across regions, creating new hybrid expressions (Appadurai, 1996). Within this framework, Zapin can be understood as a translocal cultural practice that evolves through continuous interaction and reinterpretation. The transformation of Zapin aesthetics reflected in movement, costume, music, and performance structure demonstrates its ability to adapt to changing social and cultural environments while preserving its traditional essence.

2.3. Malay-Javanese Cultural Interaction in Zapin Aesthetics

The interaction between Malay and Javanese cultures plays a significant role in shaping the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance in Indonesia. Malay culture contributes to the fluidity, elegance, and symbolic refinement of movement, while Javanese culture introduces



structural complexity, interpretative depth, and influences from local traditions such as pencak silat and court dance aesthetics (Flouryilia, 2020).

Hidajat (2021) notes that the spread of Zapin across different regions results in localized variations that reflect the cultural characteristics of each community. In Java, for example, Zapin movements tend to incorporate elements of martial arts and local musical traditions, creating a distinct aesthetic form that differs from its Malay counterparts. This process illustrates the concept of cultural hybridity, where different cultural elements interact to produce new forms of expression.

Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality can also be applied to understand how multiple cultural influences intersect within Zapin dance, creating layered meanings and identities. The Malay-Javanese interaction in Zapin is not merely a combination of elements but a dynamic process that produces a unique aesthetic configuration. This highlights the importance of examining Zapin through a cultural perspective that acknowledges the complexity of its formation.

2.4. Islamic Aesthetics in Performing Arts

The relationship between Islam and performing arts has been widely discussed in contemporary scholarship. In many Muslim societies, performing arts function as a medium for expressing ethical, spiritual, and cultural values (Alagha, 2015; Ishiguro, 2023). Rather than being viewed solely as entertainment, artistic practices are often understood as purposeful art that integrates moral dimensions within cultural expressions.

Karim and Abdullah (2022) emphasize that performing arts in maritime Southeast Asia serve as a medium for transmitting Islamic values in culturally adaptive ways. Similarly, Chan et al. (2024) show that Malay-Islamic performing arts contain symbolic and religious meanings embedded in their aesthetic structures. In Zapin dance, these values are reflected in aspects such as modest costume, controlled movement, and lyrical content that often conveys moral messages.

Latuapo (2023) further argues that traditional dance in Indonesia can embody ethical and religious values through its performative structure. This suggests that Zapin dance can be interpreted not only as a cultural practice but also as a medium of cultural and religious expression that reflects the integration of Islamic values within local traditions.

2.5. Embodiment and Aesthetic Meaning in Dance

The concept of embodiment provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding aesthetic transformation in dance. Embodiment refers to the idea that the body is not merely a physical entity, but a medium through which cultural meanings are produced, experienced, and communicated (Csordas, 1990; Farnell, 2012). Within this perspective, movement in dance constitutes a form of embodied knowledge that reflects and reproduces cultural values, social norms, and collective identities.

In Islamic contexts, embodiment is closely related to the concept of *adab*, which regulates bodily conduct, ethical behavior, and spiritual expression (Huda, 2020; Abdullah, 2020). This concept is particularly relevant in the analysis of Zapin dance, where movement patterns are characterized by discipline, harmony, and modesty. The emphasis on controlled gestures and rhythmic coordination reflects the internalization of ethical and cultural values within the performer's body, positioning the body as both a site and medium of moral expression.

From a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasizes that perception and meaning are grounded in bodily experience. In this sense, the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance can be understood as an embodied process, in which cultural interaction is expressed through movement, performance, and sensory engagement. This perspective highlights that aesthetic values are not only represented symbolically, but also enacted and experienced through the body.

Furthermore, traditional dance should be understood not merely as an aesthetic performance, but as a cultural text that embodies social, moral, and spiritual meanings. Studies on Indonesian traditional dances demonstrate that movement, music, and performance elements function as symbolic systems that communicate cultural values and collective identity. For example, the Pepe-pepe ri Makkah dance in Makassar reflects profound religious and spiritual meanings, symbolizing gratitude and devotion to God while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion within the community (Jamilah et al., 2023).

3. Research Method and Materials

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance within the Malay-Javanese cultural perspective. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth exploration of cultural meanings, artistic expressions, and interpretative dimensions embedded in traditional dance practices. The study is positioned within an ethnocoreological framework, which integrates textual and contextual analysis to understand dance as both a performative and cultural phenomenon (Yudiaryani, 2007).

3.1. Research Design

The research design focuses on analyzing the transformation of aesthetic elements in Zapin dance, including movement, costume, music, and lyrical components. These elements are examined as representations of cultural interaction between Arab, Malay, and Javanese traditions. The study adopts an interpretative cultural analysis to explore how these elements reflect broader socio-cultural dynamics.

Table 1. Research Design of the Study

Research Component	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative descriptive
Research Framework	Ethnochoreology
Research Focus	Aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance
Units of Analysis	Movement, costume, music, lyrics
Cultural Perspective	Malay-Javanese cultural interaction
Data Sources	Dance practitioners, performances, literature
Data Collection Methods	Interview, observation, documentation
Data Analysis Technique	Interpretative cultural analysis

3.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure depth and validity. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants who are actively involved in Zapin dance practices. These include Tribroto Wibisono, a Javanese dance artist; Muslim, a Zapin practitioner and academic; Taufik Hidayat, a gambus musician; and Elly Angraeni Soewondo, a senior Zapin dancer from Palembang. These informants were selected based on their expertise and long-term engagement with Zapin dance.

Second, direct observation was carried out to examine the performance of Zapin dance, focusing on movement patterns, costume usage, musical accompaniment, and interaction among performers. Observation allows the researcher to capture the embodied aspects of dance that cannot be fully explained through verbal data.

Third, documentation and literature review were used to support empirical findings. Relevant academic publications, historical records, and previous research on Zapin dance were analyzed to provide contextual understanding and theoretical grounding (Hidajat, 2021; Martiara, 2018).

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using an interpretative approach, emphasizing the understanding of meaning within cultural contexts. The analysis involves two main dimensions: textual and contextual analysis. Textual analysis focuses on the structural

elements of dance, including movement patterns, costume design, musical composition, and lyrical content. Contextual analysis examines the socio-cultural background, including historical influences, cultural interaction, and value systems embedded in Zapin dance.

This study also applies an interdisciplinary perspective to interpret aesthetic transformation as a result of cultural interaction and adaptation (Ammarnurhandyka et al., 2023). Through this approach, the research aims to reveal how aesthetic elements are shaped by the integration of Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural values.

3.4. *Research Validity*

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, this study applies triangulation techniques, including data triangulation and method triangulation. Data triangulation is achieved by comparing information obtained from different informants, while method triangulation involves the use of interviews, observations, and documentation. This approach strengthens the validity of findings and reduces potential bias in interpretation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. *Transformation of Movement: From Rhythmic Structure to Cultural Expression*

The movement structure of Zapin dance is fundamentally rooted in the rhythmic footwork known as zafn, an Arabic term referring to patterned and repetitive stepping movements. The findings of this study indicate that the emphasis on foot rhythm forms the structural foundation of Zapin choreography, where movements of the upper body such as arms and torso—follow and synchronize with the dynamics of the feet. This “feet-first movement” system creates a cohesive bodily coordination in which rhythm becomes the primary driver of expression. Previous studies confirm that Zapin originated from the zafn tradition and highlight the role of stomping rhythms as the core of its choreographic structure (Triyani et al., 2021; Yahya & Istiandini, 2019). Similarly, Susanti (2019) emphasizes that the rhythmic structure of Zapin, supported by instruments such as gambus and marwas, establishes a foundational framework in which footwork governs the overall movement ensemble.

Furthermore, Zapin can be understood as an embodied cultural system, where bodily movement becomes a medium for expressing and transmitting cultural meaning. The dominance of rhythmic footwork enables the upper body to articulate gestures that are culturally encoded, reinforcing the idea that Zapin movement is not merely technical but symbolic (Belabbès et al., 2019; Nasution et al., 2022). This perspective aligns with the notion that traditional dance operates as a system of embodied knowledge, in which rhythm, gesture, and cultural values are integrated into a unified performative structure.

The transformation of Zapin movement becomes particularly evident when viewed through the interaction between Malay and Javanese cultural contexts. In Malay traditions, Zapin movements are characterized by fluidity, softness, and wave-like dynamics, reflecting the maritime identity of coastal societies. These movements symbolize harmony with nature and emphasize values such as balance, politeness, and collective cohesion (Susanti, 2019; Triyani et al., 2021; Nasution et al., 2022). The continuous and flowing quality of Malay movement aesthetics demonstrates a cultural orientation toward refinement and emotional subtlety.

In contrast, the influence of Javanese culture introduces a more structured and interpretative dimension to Zapin movement. Elements derived from pencak silat and local performance traditions contribute to movements that are more grounded, controlled, and symbolically charged. This reflects the Javanese emphasis on discipline, philosophical depth, and inner balance in bodily expression (Flouryilia, 2020; Rohim et al., 2023). As a result, Zapin movement evolves into a hybrid form that combines Malay fluidity with Javanese structural discipline, producing a distinctive aesthetic configuration that communicates values such as self-control, resilience, and moral integrity (Hidajat et al., 2022; Nasution et al., 2022).

This hybridization process also reveals the dynamic and context-dependent nature of Zapin transformation. Some studies highlight the dominance of Malay-Arab influences as the core identity of Zapin, while others emphasize the significance of Javanese adaptation in shaping its contemporary form (Bakri & Sabran, 2023; Zain et al., 2024). Additionally, research on cultural tensions between Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab in regions such as Palembang demonstrates that movement practices can function as arenas of cultural negotiation and identity formation (Hidajat et al., 2022). These differing perspectives reinforce the understanding that Zapin movement transformation is not a linear or uniform process, but rather a dynamic interplay of cultural influences.

Moreover, Zapin dance operates as a medium for expressing religious, social, and cultural values through embodied practice. Variations of Zapin across regions such as Palembang, North Sumatra, and Jambi demonstrate how movement encodes religious practices, gender norms, and ethical values within performance (Nasution et al., 2022; Rohim et al., 2023; Rovylendes, 2020). In certain contexts, Zapin also functions as a form of cultural *da'wah*, where moral and religious messages are conveyed through the integration of movement, music, and lyrical elements (Roza & Zulkifli, 2017). This reinforces the understanding that Zapin is not merely an aesthetic performance, but a cultural system that mediates identity, belief, and social values.

From a theoretical perspective, the transformation of Zapin movement can be understood through the concept of embodiment, which positions the body as a central medium for cultural meaning-making (Csordas, 1990; Farnell, 2012). This aligns with Geertz's (1973) interpretative approach to culture, which emphasizes meaning and symbolism in social practices, as well as Giddens' (1984) notion of the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity. Within this framework, Zapin movement is not simply a choreographic form, but a cultural practice that continuously evolves through processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and contextualization.

This finding is consistent with studies on Indonesian traditional dances, where movement and performance are closely associated with spiritual expression and religious values. For example, the *Pepe-pepe ri Makkah* dance illustrates how bodily movement functions as an expression of gratitude and devotion, reflecting the integration of artistic performance and Islamic spirituality (Jamilah et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the transformation of movement in Zapin dance demonstrates that it is not a static cultural artifact, but a dynamic and evolving system shaped by rhythmic structure, cultural interaction, and embodied practice. The integration of *zafn*-based footwork, Malay aesthetic fluidity, and Javanese structural discipline produces a hybrid cultural form that reflects both continuity and transformation. This confirms that Zapin is a living tradition, continuously reinterpreted by communities as a medium for expressing identity, cultural values, and social meaning within the broader context of the Nusantara.

4.2. Costume Transformation as Cultural Symbolism

The findings indicate that the transformation of Zapin costume reflects a significant shift from functional clothing to a complex system of cultural symbolism. Historically, Zapin costumes were closely associated with Arab clothing traditions, primarily functioning to cover the body in accordance with Islamic principles of modesty. In early Zapin practices, particularly within Arab-descendant communities, costume design tended to be simple and utilitarian, emphasizing bodily coverage rather than visual elaboration (Hidajat et al., 2022; Susanti, 2019). This functional orientation aligns with broader perspectives that position clothing in Islamic performance traditions as an extension of ethical and religious values, where modesty becomes a foundational aesthetic principle (Othman, 2015; Rachmawati et al., 2023).

As Zapin expanded into the Malay cultural sphere, its costume underwent a process of localization and aesthetic refinement. The adoption of traditional Malay attire such as *baju*

kurung labuh for female dancers and baju cekak musang for male performers marked a crucial transformation in the visual identity of the dance. These costumes are not merely decorative elements but carry symbolic meanings related to dignity, morality, and social identity. The baju kurung, in particular, is culturally understood as a garment that embodies modesty, ethical conduct, and protection from social impropriety, reflecting the integration of Malay cultural values with Islamic moral frameworks (Ramadhansyah & Damayanti, 2021; Johnson, 2017).

In addition to form, color symbolism plays a significant role in the aesthetic transformation of Zapin costume. Colors such as yellow, green, red, and gold are commonly used to represent prosperity, spirituality, vitality, and nobility within Malay cultural contexts (Ramadhansyah & Damayanti, 2021; Agustono & Takari, 2019). These symbolic color choices reinforce the role of costume as a medium of cultural expression rather than mere visual ornamentation. At the same time, the compositional structure of the costume particularly in layering, proportion, and arrangement reflects Javanese aesthetic principles that emphasize order, harmony, and symbolic meaning.

The transformation of Zapin costume also reveals a broader process of intercultural synthesis involving Arab, Malay, and Javanese traditions. The integration of layered design, textile motifs, embroidery, and refined tailoring demonstrates how costume functions as a site of cultural negotiation. While Arab influence provides the foundation of modesty and religious values, Malay culture contributes elegance and symbolic richness, and Javanese aesthetics introduce structural discipline and visual balance (Agustono & Takari, 2019; Belabbès et al., 2019). This synthesis produces a hybrid visual identity that reflects both continuity and transformation within the Zapin tradition.

Scholarly perspectives on Zapin costume transformation also reveal varying emphases. Some studies highlight the dominance of Arab and Islamic elements as the core identity of Zapin, while others emphasize the dynamic interplay between Malay and Javanese influences in shaping its contemporary form (Bakri & Sabran, 2023; Zain et al., 2024). In particular, research on Zapin in Palembang illustrates how costume and performance become sites of symbolic contestation between Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab, reflecting broader processes of identity negotiation within coastal communities (Hidajat et al., 2022). These differences in emphasis suggest that the transformation of Zapin costume is not uniform but context-dependent, shaped by local cultural dynamics.

From an analytical perspective, Zapin costume can be understood as a visual cultural system that encodes social, religious, and aesthetic values. This aligns with semiotic approaches to culture, where material forms such as clothing function as symbols that communicate meaning within a social context. Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description" and Giddens' (1984) framework on the interaction between tradition and modernity provide a useful lens for interpreting costume as a medium of cultural meaning-making. In this sense, Zapin costume is not merely an accessory to performance but an integral component of embodied cultural expression.

Furthermore, recent methodological developments highlight the potential of digital and multimodal approaches in analyzing traditional costume. Studies on ontology and video annotation of Zapin performance demonstrate how elements such as color, texture, and form can be systematically interpreted within a broader cultural framework (Belabbès et al., 2019; Poti et al., 2023). These approaches expand the analytical possibilities of costume studies by integrating visual, textual, and cultural dimensions.

Overall, the transformation of Zapin costume reflects a dynamic process of cultural adaptation and continuity. Rather than indicating a loss of authenticity, this transformation demonstrates the ability of Zapin to evolve while maintaining its core cultural values. Costume serves as a medium of intercultural negotiation, integrating Arab modesty, Malay elegance, and Javanese structural aesthetics into a unified visual system.

In conclusion, the aesthetic transformation of Zapin costume illustrates a shift from functional attire to a complex cultural language that communicates identity, values, and social meaning. As part of the broader Zapin performance system, costume plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural heritage while allowing for creative adaptation in contemporary contexts. This confirms that Zapin is not a static tradition but a living cultural practice that continues to evolve through embodied, visual, and symbolic expression (Hidajat et al., 2022; Ramadhansyah & Damayanti, 2021; Agustono & Takari, 2019).

4.3. Musical Transformation: Rhythmic Identity and Cultural Continuity

The findings reveal that music in Zapin dance functions as a fundamental structural and aesthetic component that shapes both movement and meaning. The musical system of Zapin is traditionally rooted in Middle Eastern influences, particularly through the use of instruments such as the gambus, marwas, and rebana, which establish a distinctive rhythmic and melodic framework. The gambus, in particular, plays a central role in defining the tonal identity of Zapin, producing melodic patterns that reflect its historical connection to Arab musical traditions (Mizan, 2012; Nor, 2012). These elements indicate that the early musical structure of Zapin was closely linked to Islamic cultural networks and transregional exchanges across maritime Southeast Asia.

At the same time, the rhythmic structure of Zapin music is inseparable from its choreographic form. The interplay between musical rhythm and footwork creates a synchronized system in which sound and movement are mutually reinforcing. As noted by Susanti (2019), the rhythmic patterns produced by marwas and rebana function as the primary guide for dancers' foot movements, reinforcing the "feet-first" structure that characterizes Zapin choreography. This relationship demonstrates that music in Zapin is not merely an accompaniment but an integral component of the embodied performance system.

As Zapin developed within Malay cultural contexts, its musical structure underwent a process of localization and aesthetic adaptation. Malay musical sensibilities introduced a softer, more flowing melodic quality, emphasizing emotional expression and narrative continuity. Instruments such as rebab and gendang were incorporated to enrich the sonic texture, creating a layered musical composition that reflects the aesthetic refinement of Malay culture (Tiba et al., 2016). This transformation illustrates how Zapin music evolved from its Arab origins into a hybrid musical form that integrates local cultural expressions.

Furthermore, the interaction with Javanese cultural elements contributed to additional layers of musical interpretation. While the influence of Javanese music is less dominant compared to Malay and Arab elements, it is reflected in the structural organization of rhythm and the interpretative relationship between music and movement. Javanese aesthetic principles, which emphasize balance, control, and symbolic meaning, influence how musical tempo and dynamics are structured to support performative expression. This results in a more nuanced and interpretative musical system that complements the hybrid movement style of Zapin.

The transformation of Zapin music also reflects broader processes of cultural continuity and adaptation in response to modernity. Contemporary Zapin performances often incorporate modern musical elements, including electronic instruments and contemporary arrangements, without entirely abandoning traditional structures. This adaptation demonstrates the flexibility of Zapin as a cultural form that can respond to changing audience preferences while maintaining its core identity (Tiba et al., 2016). The coexistence of traditional and modern elements highlights the dynamic nature of cultural preservation, where continuity is achieved through transformation rather than rigid conservation.

From a cultural perspective, Zapin music also embodies Islamic values through its structure and lyrical integration. Studies have shown that Malay musical traditions often incorporate elements of Islamic musical culture, such as maqam-inspired tonal systems and lyrical content that conveys moral and spiritual messages (Suryati et al., 2025). In the context of Zapin, music functions not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a form of cultural transmission that

communicates ethical values and social norms. This reinforces the role of Zapin as a medium of cultural da'wah, where artistic expression becomes a vehicle for conveying religious and moral teachings (Nasution et al., 2022).

Analytically, the transformation of Zapin music can be understood as a process of cultural synthesis that integrates Arab musical heritage, Malay aesthetic refinement, and local interpretative adaptations. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on cultural hybridity, where artistic forms evolve through interaction and reinterpretation across different cultural contexts (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1984). Music, in this sense, becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, as well as between local identity and global cultural influences.

In conclusion, the musical transformation of Zapin dance reflects a dynamic interplay between continuity and change. Music functions as both a structural foundation and a cultural medium that shapes movement, conveys meaning, and sustains identity. The integration of Arab, Malay, and Javanese elements produces a hybrid musical system that embodies the evolving character of Zapin as a living tradition. This confirms that music is not only an accompaniment to dance but a central component in the aesthetic transformation and cultural resilience of Zapin within the Nusantara context.

4.4. Lyrics as Cultural Narrative and Medium of Da'wah

The findings indicate that song lyrics in Zapin dance function as a central medium for conveying cultural narratives, moral values, and religious teachings. Unlike purely instrumental dance traditions, Zapin integrates lyrical components that carry semantic meaning, making the performance not only aesthetic but also communicative. The lyrics frequently contain messages related to ethics, social behavior, and spiritual reflection, positioning Zapin as a form of cultural expression that bridges artistic performance and moral instruction (Nasution et al., 2022; Roza & Zulkifli, 2017).

Historically, the lyrical structure of Zapin is closely linked to Malay literary traditions, particularly through poetic forms such as pantun and syair. These forms are characterized by metaphorical language, rhythmic patterns, and layered meanings, enabling messages to be conveyed both explicitly and implicitly. The use of pantun reflects the Malay cultural emphasis on indirect communication, politeness, and symbolic expression, thereby positioning Zapin lyrics as a cultural text that encodes social values and collective wisdom (Agustono & Takari, 2019; Johnson, 2017).

Beyond their literary dimension, Zapin lyrics also reflect the integration of Islamic values within cultural expression. Many lyrics emphasize moral conduct, humility, respect, and devotion to God, aligning with the broader role of performing arts in Islamic societies as a medium for ethical and spiritual transmission (Suryati et al., 2025). In this context, Zapin can be understood as a form of cultural da'wah, where religious teachings are communicated through artistic performance rather than formal instruction (Nasution et al., 2022). The integration of music, movement, and lyrics creates a multisensory experience that strengthens the reception and internalization of these values among audiences.

The interaction between Malay and Javanese cultural elements further enriches the interpretative dimension of Zapin lyrics. While Malay traditions emphasize poetic subtlety and symbolic communication, Javanese influences contribute philosophical depth, balance, and reflective meaning. This interaction produces lyrical content that is not only aesthetically engaging but also intellectually and spiritually meaningful, allowing audiences to interpret messages at multiple levels—from entertainment to moral reflection (Rachmawati et al., 2023; Martiara, 2018).

Moreover, Zapin lyrics play a significant role in constructing and negotiating cultural identity. Variations in language, dialect, and thematic content across regions reflect local cultural characteristics while maintaining a shared Zapin identity. This demonstrates that lyrics function as a mediating element between local specificity and broader cultural continuity. As

noted by Hidajat et al. (2022), Zapin performance often becomes a site of identity negotiation, where cultural meanings are continuously reinterpreted in response to evolving social contexts.

From an analytical perspective, the role of lyrics in Zapin can be understood through interpretative and semiotic frameworks, in which language operates as a system of signs that conveys cultural meaning (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, Zapin lyrics function as a symbolic medium that articulates relationships between the individual, society, and religion. The integration of lyrical narrative with music and movement also reflects an embodied form of communication, where meaning is not only expressed verbally but also enacted through performance. This is consistent with studies on Indonesian traditional dances, such as the Pepe-pepe ri Makkah dance, which demonstrate how artistic performance serves as a vehicle for expressing gratitude, devotion, and Islamic spiritual values (Jamilah et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the transformation of Zapin lyrics reflects broader processes of cultural adaptation in contemporary contexts. While traditional themes related to morality and religion remain dominant, contemporary Zapin performances increasingly incorporate themes related to social change, education, and cultural identity. This indicates the flexibility of Zapin as a living tradition that evolves in response to societal needs while preserving its core values.

In conclusion, lyrics in Zapin dance play a crucial role as a medium of cultural narrative, moral communication, and identity construction. The integration of Malay poetic traditions, Islamic values, and Javanese philosophical perspectives produces a rich and multilayered form of expression. This confirms that the aesthetic transformation of Zapin extends beyond movement and music into linguistic and symbolic dimensions. Consequently, Zapin can be understood as a holistic cultural system that integrates body, sound, and language into a unified expression of cultural meaning and continuity.

To provide a clearer overview of these transformations, Table 2 summarizes the key changes in movement, costume, music, and lyrics of Zapin dance, highlighting the relationship between traditional foundations and their transformation within Malay-Javanese cultural interactions, as well as the cultural meanings embedded in each performance element.

Table 2. Aesthetic Transformation of Zapin Dance Elements.

Element	Traditional (Arab/Malay)	Basis	Transformation (Malay–Javanese)	Cultural Meaning
Movement	Rhythmic footwork repetitive patterns	(<i>zafin</i>)	Integration of Malay fluidity and Javanese structure	Harmony, discipline, cultural adaptation
Costume	Functional modest clothing (Arab influence)		Symbolic attire (<i>baju kurung, cekak musang</i>) with aesthetic refinement	Identity, modesty, social values
Music	Gambus, marwas, rebana (Arab musical roots)		Hybrid musical system with Malay and local adaptations	Cultural continuity, emotional expression
Lyrics	Religious and moral messages		Integration of Malay poetic forms and local narratives	Da'wah, cultural transmission

As shown in Table 2, the transformation of Zapin dance reflects a consistent pattern of cultural synthesis across all performance elements.

The overall findings of this study can be further synthesized into a conceptual framework illustrating the interaction between cultural elements and aesthetic transformation in Zapin dance. Figure 1 presents this interaction, showing how Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural influences dynamically shape movement, costume, music, and lyrics.

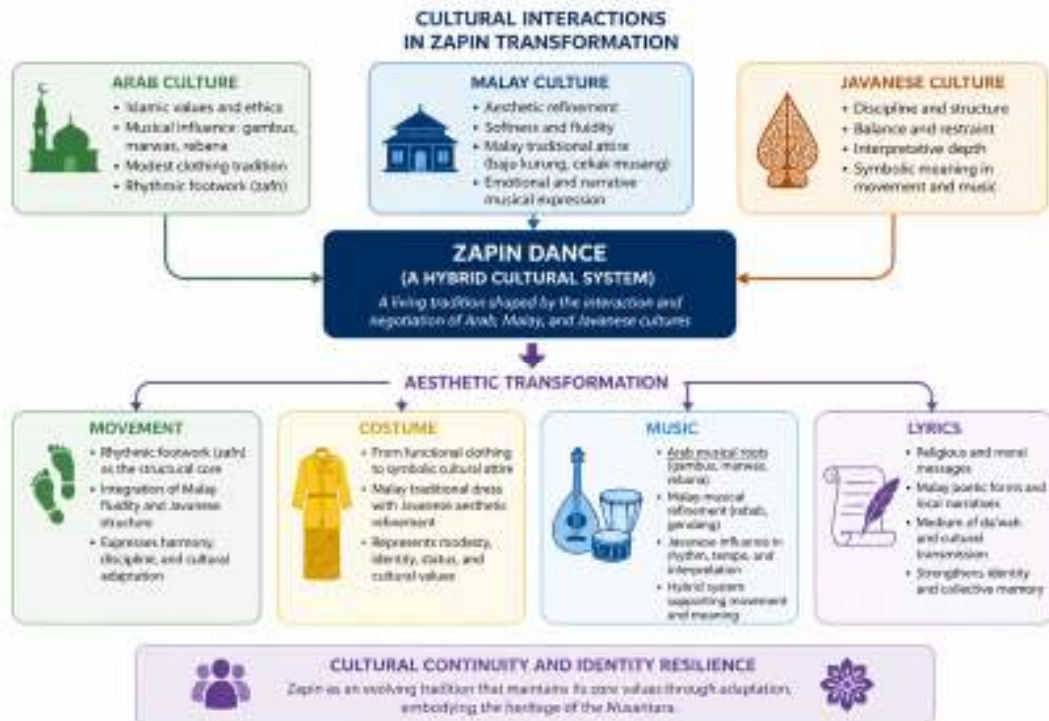


Figure 1. Cultural Interaction and Aesthetic Transformation in Zapin Dance
 (Source: Author's synthesis)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance is shaped by the continuous interaction between Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural elements. These elements collectively function as interconnected components that construct meaning and cultural identity within the performance. The diagram confirms that the transformation of Zapin is not a fragmented process, but a holistic and dynamic synthesis that reflects cultural continuity, adaptation, and negotiation within the broader context of the Nusantara.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance reflects a dynamic process of cultural interaction and adaptation within the Malay-Javanese cultural perspective. The transformation is evident across key elements of performance, including movement, costume, music, and lyrics, each of which demonstrates a synthesis of Arab, Malay, and Javanese cultural influences. The rhythmic foundation of zafn-based footwork, the symbolic refinement of Malay costume traditions, the hybrid musical system, and the narrative function of lyrics collectively illustrate that Zapin operates as an integrated cultural system.

The findings reveal that Zapin is not a static traditional form but a living cultural practice that continuously evolves through processes of localization, reinterpretation, and intercultural negotiation. In particular, the interaction between Malay aesthetic fluidity and Javanese structural discipline produces a distinctive hybrid identity that reflects both continuity and transformation. This confirms that aesthetic change in Zapin is not merely technical but deeply rooted in cultural values, social norms, and religious meanings.

Furthermore, this study highlights the role of Zapin as a medium of cultural transmission, where artistic expression functions to communicate moral, social, and spiritual values. The integration of movement, music, and lyrics demonstrates that Zapin embodies an “embodied cultural system” in which meaning is expressed through performative practice. This

reinforces the position of Zapin as both an artistic form and a cultural discourse within the Nusantara context.

In conclusion, the aesthetic transformation of Zapin dance contributes to a broader understanding of how traditional performing arts sustain their relevance in contemporary society. By integrating cultural heritage with adaptive innovation, Zapin demonstrates resilience as a living tradition that continues to reflect and negotiate cultural identity in a changing social landscape.

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