

Sarawak Malay Dance: An Introduction to The Teaching Practice of Malay Traditional Dance

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Abstract—This study addresses the lack of structured pedagogical frameworks in the teaching of Malay traditional dance, particularly within the context of Sarawak’s unique cultural landscape. The primary objective is to examine how Sarawak’s localized dance practices contribute to effective teaching methodologies that preserve and transmit both artistic and cultural knowledge. Employing a qualitative research design, the study synthesizes data from ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews with dance educators and practitioners, and content analysis of existing literature. Findings reveal that traditional Malay dance in Sarawak functions not only as a performative art form but also as a conduit for cultural values, historical memory, and community identity. The pedagogical approaches observed incorporate embodied learning, storytelling, and communal participation, which collectively enhance cultural literacy and learner engagement. The study concludes that integrating localized cultural elements into dance pedagogy fosters deeper educational impact, empowering both instructors and learners to use traditional dance as a tool for cultural preservation, social advocacy, and identity formation. These insights offer a foundational framework for culturally responsive teaching practices applicable within broader educational and activist contexts.

Keywords—Sarawak Malay dance, dance pedagogy, cultural heritage, traditional arts education, community empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

Malay traditional dance serves as a vital conduit for the transmission of Malaysia’s cultural identity, values, and historical consciousness. It is not merely a form of artistic expression but a living cultural archive that encapsulates the rhythms of everyday life, the philosophies of belief systems, and the collective memory of its people. As a performative medium, Malay dance integrates aesthetic form with storytelling, ritual, and social interaction, making it a multidimensional tool for both cultural preservation and education.

In the context of Sarawak, Malaysia’s largest and most ethnically diverse state, the practice of Malay traditional dance is particularly significant. Sarawak’s multicultural landscape, comprising Malay, Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Orang Ulu communities among others, has resulted in a rich tapestry of cultural expressions. Within this unique sociocultural environment, Malay traditional dance not only reflects shared cultural values but also embodies localized interpretations that differentiate Sarawak’s practices from those of Peninsular Malaysia. These regional adaptations include variations in movement vocabulary, costume design, musical accompaniment, and thematic content, reflecting Sarawak’s historical interactions with indigenous, Islamic, and colonial influences.

Despite the richness of this cultural resource, pedagogical frameworks for teaching Malay traditional dance, especially within the Sarawakian context, remain underdeveloped and under-documented. While national dance syllabi and formal education programs exist, they often lack the cultural specificity and community-based practices that characterize traditional transmission methods in Sarawak. This disconnect poses a risk to the continuity of intangible heritage, particularly as younger generations become increasingly disconnected from traditional cultural forms in the face of modernization and globalization.

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring how traditional Malay dance is taught and transmitted in Sarawak, focusing on pedagogical strategies that incorporate cultural knowledge, embodied learning, and

community engagement. The research aims to uncover how local educators and cultural practitioners adapt their teaching methods to sustain cultural practices while also making them accessible and relevant to contemporary learners.

By grounding the inquiry in both theory and field-based evidence, the study positions Sarawak's dance pedagogy as a potential model for culturally responsive education that aligns with broader goals of heritage preservation, identity formation, and social transformation. It further considers how these practices can inform policy, curriculum development, and activist initiatives aimed at sustaining Malaysia's diverse cultural ecosystems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The teaching and preservation of traditional dance as a cultural practice has long been a subject of scholarly interest across disciplines, including anthropology, education, and performance studies. This review situates the pedagogy of Sarawak Malay traditional dance within the broader discourse on cultural transmission, embodied learning, and community-based education, drawing on both regional studies and global frameworks.

A. Traditional Dance as Cultural Repository

Traditional dance functions as an archive of cultural memory, often encoded with spiritual, historical, and moral narratives. Kartomi (1981) argues that dance and music in Southeast Asia serve as aural and kinetic texts that reflect the cosmology and social hierarchies of their originating cultures. In the Malay context, Mohd Anis Md Nor (1993) details how Zapin and other regional dance forms are deeply rooted in Islamic aesthetic principles, ritual structures, and communal storytelling. Roziah Omar (2012), writing specifically on Sarawak's performing arts, views them as dynamic cultural forms that mediate tradition and modernity, identity, and state politics.

In Sarawak, localized adaptations of Malay traditional dance reflect a synthesis of indigenous and Islamic influences, marked by unique movement vocabularies, costume styles, and musical traditions. These forms are not static; they evolve in dialogue with community needs and socio-political shifts, making their documentation and teaching all the more urgent.

B. Embodied Learning and Cultural Transmission

A growing body of literature underscores the value of embodied learning in arts education. Sklar (2000) and Anttila (2007) argue that dance learning involves more than technique; it engages memory, emotion, and identity through bodily experience. In traditional dance, the physical act of movement becomes a means of internalizing cultural knowledge that is often transmitted orally or experientially. These insights are especially relevant in non-Western, performative cultures where embodied practice precedes formal theory.

Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) further supports this view by asserting that knowledge is best acquired in authentic, social contexts. In Sarawak, traditional dance is often taught in informal settings, community halls, cultural centers, and religious gatherings, where learners engage directly with cultural practitioners. This approach fosters both technical mastery and sociocultural integration, reflecting the communal nature of traditional knowledge transmission.

C. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000) emphasizes the importance of aligning educational content and methods with learners' cultural backgrounds. In traditional arts education, this involves integrating local values, languages, and practices into teaching approaches. Such pedagogy validates students' lived experiences and empowers them through cultural affirmation. In the Malaysian context, Banks (2008) highlights how multicultural education can bridge ethnic divides and promote national unity, especially when indigenous cultural forms like dance are included in curricula.

Traditional dance in Sarawak represents a prime opportunity for applying culturally responsive teaching. It allows educators to foster not only skill acquisition but also identity development, intercultural understanding, and civic participation. The performative nature of dance also aligns with the Multiliteracies Framework (New London Group, 1996), which recognizes multiple modes of communication that include gesture, movement, and space as valid forms of literacy and learning.

D. Performance, Resistance, and Identity

Schechner's Performance Theory (2006) provides another analytical lens by viewing traditional dance not merely as entertainment but as ritual and socio-political performance. Dance can serve as a symbolic act of resistance, a public display of identity, and a means of negotiating power. In the context of Sarawak, traditional dance performances often carry messages about environmental sustainability, inter-ethnic harmony, and spiritual belief systems.

This performative function aligns with Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy, which frames education as a tool for liberation. By teaching dance as a means of exploring and questioning cultural values, educators can empower students to become critical thinkers and cultural stewards.

E. Heritage Education and Inter-generational Learning

The teaching of Malay traditional dance also fits within the framework of Heritage Education Theory (Smith, 2006), which emphasizes the experiential transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Through performance and practice, students engage with traditions that connect them to previous generations, thus fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. In Sarawak, this is particularly evident in community festivals, school programs, and inter-generational workshops where elders and youth come together in the learning process.

F. Synthesis

Collectively, these theoretical and empirical perspectives underscore the need for pedagogical models that are localized, participatory, and culturally grounded. The literature affirms that dance education, particularly in traditional forms, is most effective when it integrates bodily practice, community values, and socio-political awareness. However, there remains a significant gap in region-specific studies that document and theorize these pedagogical practices, particularly in East Malaysia. This study aims to fill that gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of how Sarawak's Malay dance pedagogy functions as a culturally responsive and socially transformative educational model.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the pedagogical strategies and cultural dimensions embedded in the teaching of Malay traditional dance in Sarawak. The approach is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, recognizing that cultural knowledge and learning experiences are socially constructed and contextually situated.

A. Research Design

A multi-method qualitative design was employed, combining ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis. This triangulated approach provided a robust framework for examining the pedagogical nuances and sociocultural dynamics at play within traditional dance education.

B. Research Sites and Participants

Fieldwork for this study was conducted over a six-month period in 2024 across selected locations in Sarawak. Data collection was undertaken in three primary sites: (1) the Betong District of Betong Division during a dance workshop organized by *Majlis Seni Sarawak*; (2) the Sematan Sub-District in Lundu District of Kuching Division during a program coordinated by the *Persatuan Kesenian Sri Sarawak (PKSS)*; and (3) the Bintulu District of Bintulu Division during an event facilitated by the *District Education Department, Bintulu*.

At each field site, purposive sampling was employed to recruit ten key informants with extensive expertise in the teaching or preservation of Malay traditional dance. The sample included four senior dance educators, three cultural practitioners affiliated with the Sarawak Arts Council, two community dance leaders, and one curriculum advisor from a local arts academy. This sampling strategy ensured that the participants represented a cross-section of institutional, community, and pedagogical perspectives relevant to Malay traditional dance.

C. Data Collection Methods

Three main data collection techniques were used:

1. **Ethnographic Observations:** Researchers attended and documented over 20 hours of dance classes, rehearsals, and community performances. Observations focused on instructional methods, teacher-student interactions, use of cultural symbols, and the integration of music, attire, and space in teaching practices.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted in Malay and English, depending on participant preference. Questions explored themes such as teaching philosophy, cultural transmission, challenges in pedagogy, and the role of dance in community identity.
3. **Document and Content Analysis:** Supplementary materials, such as local dance curricula, training manuals, cultural policies, and archival footage, were reviewed to contextualize and compare observed pedagogical practices.

D. Data Analysis

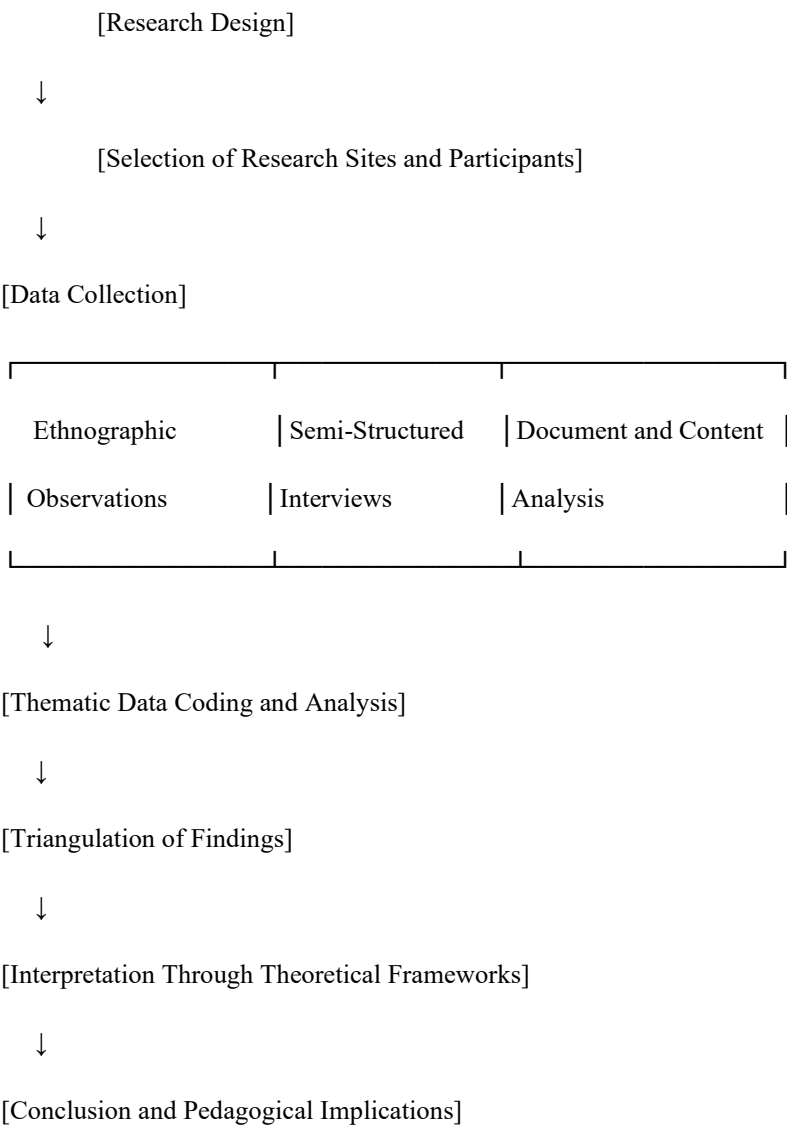
All interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. Observational notes were categorized based on recurrent pedagogical patterns (e.g., mimicry, storytelling, ritual integration). A thematic analysis framework was employed to synthesize findings across data sources, with special attention to how pedagogical techniques aligned with theoretical models such as embodied learning, culturally responsive teaching, and performance theory.

E. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point. Pseudonyms were used in reporting qualitative data to protect participants' identities. Additionally, care was taken to represent cultural practices with accuracy and sensitivity, avoiding appropriation or misinterpretation.

F. Research Limitations

While the qualitative design provides depth, the study's findings are context-specific and not intended for generalization. Language barriers, time constraints, and differing interpretations of cultural terms posed challenges, though these were mitigated through local assistance and iterative validation with participants.



IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

A. Dance as Cultural Narrative

In the context of Sarawak, traditional Malay dance operates as a dynamic form of cultural storytelling, transmitting historical memory, communal values, and local identity through embodied movement. Each choreographic motif, musical accompaniment, and costume element serves as a semiotic system that communicates meaning far beyond mere entertainment. Dance thus functions as an alternative form of literacy, especially in communities where oral traditions and performative knowledge remain central.

Many of the dances observed, such as *Zapin*, *Tarian Asli*, and localized variants of *Joget*, are intricately linked to rituals, agricultural cycles, Islamic influences, and the lived experiences of Sarawak's multiethnic society. For instance, the *Zapin Sebat*, performed in a coastal Malay village, incorporated gestures mimicking sea navigation and fishing, evoking the livelihood of the community while simultaneously embedding religious piety through structured, repetitive movements that reflect spiritual discipline.

This symbolic layering aligns with Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, where performance is not merely aesthetic but ritualistic and communicative, telling stories that both reflect and shape social life. In these dances, narrative is not conveyed through a linear plot but through embodied symbols: the bend of the knees indicating humility, circular formations denoting unity, and hand gestures invoking blessings or warnings.

Furthermore, using the lens of Heritage Education Theory (Smith, 2006), these dances can be understood as "living archives", repositories of intangible cultural heritage actively reshaped with each performance. Teachers and choreographers in Sarawak emphasize these embedded meanings to students, often introducing a dance with a detailed explanation of its origin, symbolism, and moral messages. Such instruction turns dance into a vehicle for cultural literacy, where learners not only mimic movements but also internalize their cultural implications.

Oral storytelling is also integrated into pedagogy. Teachers often recount folktales or local myths related to the dance, thereby reinforcing inter-generational knowledge transmission. This practice echoes Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), as it values the learner's cultural background and uses narrative as a bridge to deeper engagement.

The dances also offer resistance to the homogenizing forces of modernity and globalization. In Sarawak, where state narratives often prioritize certain cultural forms, traditional Malay dance offers a counter-narrative, preserving local dialects, customs, and aesthetics. The choreography becomes a platform through which communities assert their uniqueness and agency, consistent with Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which frames education as a means of cultural empowerment and resistance.

In summary, Sarawak Malay traditional dance functions as a complex narrative form, interweaving movement, music, costume, and oral traditions to construct and convey layered cultural stories. As such, it provides a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching history, ethics, and identity in an embodied and affective manner.

B. Pedagogical Approaches

The pedagogical practices observed in Sarawak's traditional Malay dance instruction reflect a blend of cultural authenticity, communal learning, and adaptive teaching strategies. These methods are rooted in oral tradition, performance-based mentorship, and culturally embedded teaching philosophies that differ significantly from Western models of formal dance education.

1. Learning Through Demonstration and Imitation

A core component of traditional dance pedagogy in Sarawak is learning by doing. Instructors often begin sessions with live demonstrations, encouraging students to mirror movements in real time. This method aligns with Embodied Learning Theory (Anttila, 2007), where knowledge is gained through kinesthetic experience. Rather than relying on written notation, students internalize the dance through repeated physical practice, developing muscle memory and expressive nuance over time.

This technique also resonates with Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as learners are immersed in authentic social and cultural settings, often community halls, village festivals, or cultural centers, where they engage with seasoned practitioners and peers. This apprenticeship model fosters not only skill acquisition but also a sense of belonging and identity within the cultural community.

2. Storytelling as Instruction

Storytelling plays a central role in pedagogy, with instructors weaving narratives around each dance's origin, moral lessons, or symbolic gestures. These stories serve as mnemonic tools and deepen the learner's understanding of the cultural significance behind movements. For instance, before performing *Zapin Simanggang*, an instructor may recount the tale of the Stumbin River of Simanggang District and its importance to local livelihoods and cosmology. This narrative framing enhances learner motivation and emotional connection to the dance, consistent with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

3. Use of Music, Costume, and Spatial Design

Dance lessons are often accompanied by recorded traditional music, creating a multisensory learning environment. The integration of engkeromong (*a gamelan set of the Sarawak natives' instruments*), gendang (*rebana*), and traditional chants (Ado Lanang) helps students internalize rhythm, tempo, and cultural ambiance. Instructors emphasize not just steps but how dancers relate to sound, space, and costume. Wearing traditional attire such as *baju kurung*, *songket*, or *selendang* during practice reinforces cultural aesthetics and body awareness.

This holistic method aligns with the Multiliteracies Framework (New London Group, 1996), which recognizes that learning occurs through multiple modes, visual, auditory, gestural, spatial, and not just through text or verbal instruction. Dance education in Sarawak exemplifies this multimodal pedagogy.

4. Alphabetization and Movement Sequencing

An innovative practice observed among some educators is the use of alphabetization, assigning letters or simple codes to specific movement sequences. This strategy, though modern in design, helps novice learners mentally organize complex routines. For example, "A" may correspond to a basic step, "B" to a turning gesture, and so on. This coding system aids retention and supports differentiated learning, particularly for beginners.

5. Values-Based Instruction

Beyond technique, traditional dance pedagogy is imbued with social and moral instruction. Teachers emphasize values such as discipline (*tatasusila*), respect for elders (*adab*), cooperation, and humility. These values are embedded in the structure of the class, starting with greetings, acknowledging instruments and space, and maintaining synchronized group dynamics.

This aligns with Heritage Education Theory (Smith, 2006), which emphasizes the role of education in transmitting intangible cultural values. The moral dimension of dance pedagogy ensures that students not only perform competently but also embody the ethos of their culture.

6. Community-Based and Inter-generational Learning

Much of the dance education occurs outside formal institutions, in community spaces led by local custodians of tradition. These inter-generational settings, where elders teach youth and young people assist in facilitating classes, promote horizontal and vertical transmission of knowledge. This form of collective learning also encourages mentorship and reciprocal teaching.

Informed by Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), these grassroots practices promote empowerment and resistance to cultural erasure. Dance becomes a means of social cohesion and cultural continuity, especially in the face of modernization and declining youth participation in traditional arts.

Summary

The pedagogical approaches in Sarawak's traditional Malay dance education exemplify a culturally embedded, embodied, and values-driven model of teaching. Rooted in community, enriched by narrative, and supported by sensory engagement, these methods foster not just artistic skill but cultural identity and social purpose. They represent a living pedagogy that adapts to changing times while preserving the core of heritage transmission.

C. Embodied Learning and Identity Formation

Embodied learning in Sarawak Malay traditional dance is not merely a method of physical instruction; it is a transformative process through which learners internalize cultural identity, social values, and historical consciousness. The bodily engagement with movement, rhythm, and space allows for a holistic learning experience where the dancer becomes both performer and vessel of cultural knowledge.

1. Embodiment as Cognitive and Cultural Process

According to Sklar (2000) and Anttila (2007), embodied learning refers to the process by which knowledge is acquired through and stored in the body. In the context of traditional Malay dance in Sarawak, this concept manifests when students physically absorb patterns of movement that carry symbolic meaning, gestures representing natural phenomena, spiritual reverence, or social hierarchies. For example, the soft wrist movements and grounded posture common in *Tarian Asli* or *Inang* are not only stylistic but also reflective of humility and grace, key virtues in Malay philosophy.

These physical expressions are tightly woven with memory, emotion, and meaning. As students repeat movements within a culturally significant framework, they develop a bodily consciousness of "being Malay," deeply tied to Sarawakian customs and locality. The body becomes a site of memory and identity, echoing the idea that "the body remembers what the mind forgets."

2. Formation of Cultural Identity

Dance participants, especially youths, often describe a stronger sense of cultural identity as they progress in their training. Through consistent practice and exposure to traditional narratives embedded in dance, learners report increased pride in their heritage and awareness of their role as cultural bearers. This process is particularly impactful in multicultural Sarawak, where preserving ethnic-specific practices strengthens communal belonging amid broader national narratives.

This experience resonates with Ladson-Billings' (1995) concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, where students engage more meaningfully when instruction is linked to their heritage. In Sarawak, where urbanization and globalization threaten to dilute traditional arts, such embodied pedagogy provides a powerful counterbalance.

3. Gender, Spirituality, and Identity

Embodied learning also intersects with issues of gender and spirituality. Some dances, such as *Tarian Bubu*, are spiritually charged, rooted in ritual and healing. Participants are taught to approach these dances with emotional and cultural sensitivity. Similarly, gender-specific movements reinforce cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity, such as the delicate hand movements expected of women dancers and the firm, grounded steps of male performers.

These embodied gender norms, while traditional, are also evolving. Some educators in Sarawak are consciously reshaping choreography to be inclusive, thus broadening identity formation to include progressive interpretations of cultural roles. This negotiation of tradition and modernity through the body highlights how identity is not fixed but dynamically enacted.

4. Affective and Social Dimensions

Emotion plays a crucial role in embodied learning. The performative nature of dance fosters joy, pride, and sometimes nostalgia, which reinforce personal and collective attachment to the tradition. Group practice sessions promote camaraderie, trust, and shared experience, further anchoring identity within a community context. This is supported by Wenger's (1998) idea of communities of practice, where identity is co-constructed through social participation and shared repertoires.

Moreover, the process of learning through the body transcends verbal or textual instruction. Students often express their most profound moments of cultural realization not through words but through the *feeling* of the dance, the rhythm of the drums, the sway of the body, and the synchrony with others. These embodied experiences become formative in shaping how students see themselves in relation to their culture.

Summary

Embodied learning in Sarawak Malay traditional dance is a deeply integrative process where cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions converge. By physically enacting cultural scripts through dance, learners do more than perform; they live the heritage, feel the values, and negotiate their place within it. This process is instrumental in the formation of cultural identity, making dance not only an educational medium but a personal and communal rite of passage.

D. Dance as Activism and Community Empowerment

In the Sarawak context, traditional Malay dance serves not only as a medium for aesthetic expression but also as a strategic form of cultural activism and community empowerment. Rooted in historical traditions and local identity, dance becomes a socially engaged practice that allows communities to reclaim narratives, resist marginalization, and foster inter-generational solidarity.

1. Dance as Cultural Activism

Dance as a form of activism in Sarawak emerges through its role in resisting cultural erosion and asserting ethnic identity. As globalizing forces and modern entertainment increasingly dominate youth interests, traditional dance practitioners use performances to raise awareness about the richness and relevance of local heritage. Community-organized festivals, school-based cultural competitions, and heritage tourism events often feature traditional dance not only as entertainment but as a declaration of cultural resilience.

In this context, traditional dance aligns with Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy, which conceptualizes education as a tool for liberation. Dance instructors and cultural activists use choreography and narrative to challenge passive consumption of culture, instead inviting critical engagement. For example, certain performances incorporate environmental themes or indigenous rights narratives, subtly embedding political messages within cultural frameworks.

2. Inter-generational Transmission and Community Healing

Dance also functions as a bridge between generations. Older practitioners are often seen as cultural guardians who mentor younger dancers, passing on not only techniques but also stories, rituals, and moral values. This transmission nurtures respect for elders and reinforces continuity of cultural knowledge.

In rural Sarawak communities, traditional dance workshops often double as informal gatherings for collective healing, storytelling, and community strengthening. These sessions empower marginalized voices, especially those of women and indigenous peoples, by centering their contributions to cultural heritage.

Such participatory practices resonate with Heritage Education Theory (Smith, 2006), which emphasizes community-centered, experiential learning that fosters belonging, identity, and agency.

3. Empowerment through Performance

Performance itself is an empowering act. Community members who might otherwise lack access to formal education or public platforms find expression through dance. Young performers gain confidence, public speaking skills, and leadership qualities through participation in performances and workshops. In this sense, dance becomes a democratized space for voice and visibility.

Furthermore, performances that address contemporary social issues such as climate change, deforestation, or cultural appropriation transform the stage into a site of resistance and civic education. These dances go beyond aesthetic representation and act as “embodied texts” that articulate community concerns, dreams, and calls to action.

4. Women and Youth Empowerment

In many Sarawak communities, dance has also been a medium for empowering women and youth. Traditionally, certain dance forms were gendered, with rigid expectations about who could perform. Contemporary reinterpretations led by female choreographers and educators have begun to challenge these norms, offering young girls and women leadership roles within cultural organizations.

Youth-focused dance programs, particularly in urban fringe areas and rural schools, have shown positive outcomes in fostering self-esteem, discipline, and community pride. These programs often function in tandem with language preservation initiatives, local crafts training, and traditional music education, contributing to a holistic empowerment model.

5. Institutional and Policy Support

While community-driven, many of these initiatives are increasingly supported by Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs), government cultural agencies (such as Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara as well as Majlis Seni Sarawak), and heritage preservation organizations. These partnerships provide logistical support, funding, and platforms for performance, thereby reinforcing the social and political capital of dance as a form of empowerment.

Programs such as "Sayangi Warisan Kita" and "Program Seni Budaya Sekolah", Kesenian Desa, and Kelas Bimbingan Seni Tari aim to institutionalize traditional dance education while empowering local communities to take ownership of their cultural narratives.

Summary

Dance in Sarawak transcends its artistic boundaries to become a vital tool for activism and community empowerment. It affirms cultural identity, promotes inter-generational dialogue, and provides a platform for resistance, healing, and hope. Embedded within local practices and supported by critical pedagogical frameworks, traditional dance emerges not only as a performance art but as an informative social force.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal a rich interplay between traditional dance, cultural heritage, and pedagogical strategies in Sarawak. These dynamics illuminate how localized practices in dance education contribute not only to artistic transmission but also to broader goals of identity formation, social empowerment, and cultural sustainability. This section unpacks the implications of these findings through relevant theoretical frameworks and positions them within the wider discourse on heritage-based education.

A. Integrating Cultural Context into Pedagogy

The study affirms that culturally grounded pedagogical approaches are central to the effective teaching of Malay traditional dance in Sarawak. The practices observed, such as oral storytelling, embodiment, and communal participation, resonate strongly with Ladson-Billings' (1995) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which advocates for

instruction that connects with learners' cultural references and lived experiences. Teachers in Sarawak act not only as skill transmitters but as cultural custodians, embedding historical narratives, social values, and communal ethics into their lessons.

This culturally responsive approach elevates dance education from mere technique-based training to a holistic and transformative practice, reaffirming the centrality of local identity in the learning process. It challenges dominant pedagogical paradigms that often marginalize indigenous knowledge systems and validates the use of traditional arts as formal educational content.

B. Embodied Learning as Cultural Cognition

The body, as observed in the teaching and learning of traditional dance, becomes a site of memory, knowledge, and meaning-making. Through embodied learning (Sklar, 2000; Anttila, 2007), learners internalize cultural values and social messages physically, enabling a deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with tradition. Movements are not taught in abstraction but through lived demonstration, often in inter-generational spaces that foster relational knowledge exchange.

This embodiment reinforces the premise of Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where knowledge acquisition is anchored in social interaction within authentic cultural contexts. Learners do not passively consume knowledge; they actively co-construct meaning by performing and participating within the cultural environment that shapes the dance form.

C. Dance as a Performative and Political Act

The role of performance in Sarawak Malay dance extends beyond aesthetics; it is deeply performative in the Schechnerian sense, functioning as a dynamic site of negotiation, identity affirmation, and resistance. Dance in this context aligns with Performance Theory (Schechner, 2006), where the act of dancing becomes a political statement, a means of asserting cultural presence, and a method of storytelling that preserves collective memory.

Many community performances incorporate narratives of environmental stewardship, indigenous rights, and social harmony, using choreography and music as non-verbal discourse. This reinforces Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), where education through dance becomes a tool for consciousness-raising and liberation. Learners and audiences alike engage with the cultural and political content embedded within the dance, fostering awareness and activism.

D. Dance and Multimodal Literacy

The use of music, movement, costume, gesture, and space in traditional dance supports the Multimodal Literacies Framework (New London Group, 1996), which emphasizes diverse ways of meaning-making. This is particularly crucial for learners in oral or semi-oral cultures, where traditional modes of communication may be marginalized in formal education systems.

By incorporating dance into the curriculum or community education, educators tap into these multimodal literacies, enhancing cognitive access, inclusivity, and engagement. For learners who may struggle with textual or verbal instruction, dance offers an alternative yet equally rigorous pathway to knowledge.

E. Heritage Education and Community Empowerment

This study also illustrates how traditional dance contributes to Heritage Education (Smith, 2006), facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer and community empowerment. Community members, especially elders, serve as informal educators, mentoring youth and reinforcing cultural continuity. This process strengthens social bonds and affirms the community's role in preserving and evolving its heritage.

The communal performances, often staged in public spaces or during festivals, reinforce collective identity and instill pride in local traditions. When youth engage in these performances, they participate in a dialogic process that reaffirms their belonging and roles as future custodians of cultural knowledge.

F. Reframing Dance Pedagogy as Social Practice

Overall, the findings suggest a reframing of traditional dance pedagogy not as a static transmission of heritage, but as an active, evolving social practice that merges education, cultural sustainability, and activism. Sarawak's localized model exemplifies how traditional arts can be mobilized within both formal and informal educational settings to foster identity, build agency, and generate social cohesion.

This model also offers a counter-narrative to the often Eurocentric structures of dance education, proposing a decolonized, community-rooted alternative that centers indigenous epistemologies and lived cultural realities.

Summary

The discussion demonstrates that Sarawak's pedagogical practices in traditional Malay dance are far more than methods of movement instruction; they are vital, embodied, and participatory acts of cultural continuity, political expression, and social empowerment. Theories of culturally responsive pedagogy, performance, critical education, and multimodal literacy provide robust frameworks to interpret these practices. This not only enriches our understanding of traditional dance education but also highlights its potential as a transformative and liberating educational model.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the pedagogical practices employed in the teaching of Malay traditional dance in Sarawak offer a compelling model for culturally responsive, community-rooted education. By interweaving technical instruction with cultural immersion, narrative storytelling, embodied learning, and communal engagement, these localized pedagogies transcend conventional dance training. They serve not only to transmit movement techniques but also to instill cultural consciousness, social values, and inter-generational connectivity.

The research demonstrates that Sarawak's dance education reflects a holistic educational model in which learners engage with history, identity, and community through performative and participatory means. These practices align with broader educational theories such as culturally relevant pedagogy, situated learning, critical pedagogy, and heritage education. In doing so, they challenge dominant, standardized models of curriculum design and call for a re-centering of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional art forms in educational discourse.

Importantly, the findings underscore the transformative potential of traditional dance as both a pedagogical and sociopolitical tool. Dance becomes a vehicle not only for artistic expression but also for activism, identity affirmation, and social dialogue, particularly relevant in multicultural and postcolonial contexts like Malaysia.

The implications of this study are multifold. For educators, it offers a framework that integrates cultural literacy, emotional intelligence, and embodied cognition into teaching strategies. For policymakers, it highlights the value of supporting localized arts education as a means of cultural preservation and community empowerment. For activists and community organizers, it illustrates how traditional dance can be mobilized to engage youth, revitalize heritage practices, and advocate for social issues.

Future research should expand this inquiry beyond Sarawak to examine how other regional dance traditions in Malaysia or Southeast Asia employ similar or divergent pedagogical models. Comparative studies could further explore how traditional dance functions within both formal school curricula and informal learning settings. Additionally, interdisciplinary research involving education, anthropology, and performance studies could deepen our understanding of how embodied cultural practices shape learning and identity formation across different cultural contexts.

In conclusion, Sarawak's pedagogical approaches to Malay traditional dance exemplify a sustainable and socially meaningful form of arts education, one that preserves intangible heritage while empowering present and future generations. Recognizing and integrating these approaches into broader educational and cultural frameworks is essential for fostering inclusive, identity-affirming, and culturally rich learning environments.

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