Aceh, the northernmost province of Sumatra (known as Serambi Mekah ‘The Verandah of Mecca’) has a wealth of Muslim musical genres and body movement or dance forms. It was one of the first provinces of the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago to develop musical art forms associated with Islam. Unlike in many other Muslim societies, the Acehnese have a martial art tradition which is integrated into performances and includes female as well as male heroism.

Seudati

In Sufi mysticism as practised in Aceh and elsewhere, the ecstatic movements of the body are recognized as the expression of spontaneous emotion caused by the experience of the divine. Seudati is the best-known Acehnese expression of this. It is believed to have originated in the Pidie area of northeastern Aceh, but is now found all over Aceh’s coastal areas and even in parts of the interior. In coastal Aceh, seudati is usually performed by men, except in West Aceh, where it is performed by both men and women. The body percussion and dance or concerted body movement used in the performance is a centuries-old Muslim tradition found not only in Aceh but also in parts of North Africa and West Asia.

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The Female Form of the Martial Art Genre in Meulaboh, West Aceh, Indonesia

Seudati Inong

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Seudati Inong: The Female Form of the Martial Art Genre in Meulaboh, West Aceh, Indonesia

Seulamat datang bapak ngon ibu
Konneu neutaja u Aceh Barat
Ranup neupajoh di dalam puun

Mulia rekan mameti suena
He ellallah alah e han
Han neunem rila Putroe Baren
Han neunem rila
He ellallah Putroe Cut Baren
Duke steuwe melouge
Ka geuduek sidroe geutueg puusa

Welcome, men and women present
To this place in West Aceh
We prepare betel nut in the container
We pay our respects in sweet voices
Oh
Putroe Baren does not want people to do certain things
Does not want them to do certain things

The Second Performance

In the second performance the syek started by singing the customary greeting to Allah and the Prophet as well as the guests. She sang in slow metre to a five-tone palette, after which the chorus repeated the syek’s melodic line and text. The slow metre was used by both soloist and chorus without body percussion in some sections contrasted with the metered singing accompanied by body percussion in others. The dancer-singers described their dance movements in their song texts as well as dancing them, dwelling on the fact that they all came from the same school and adhering to themselves in verse as small yellow birds.

The Third Performance

In the third performance, the two panton (quartet couplets) presented images of boats, the sea, a river, flowers and a garden. They alluded to the verse’s real meaning - that the sad male singer is waiting for a girl (flower) to grow up so that he can marry her, and that he is crying at the thought of such happiness. Since there is a reference to the port of Singkil in the southwest, we may assume that the panto

Bismillah ratet meusuekut
Tate puuet urat geuproupon sambong
Allah nibak malen nyoe
Allah kamo meunari
Allah dalam istana
Allah kamo meunari

Deungo lon kisah uroe kiamet
Malam Jumeu’at phon teuka geumpa
Geumpa keodu malen Alkeuet
Geumpa ka meuheut ‘oh wettee iisya
Nyawong geutueyoe di dalam badan
Barong pinjamane iet taan buen
Oh troh bak wettee ka neukaj pulang
Nyawong lam badan taan puoeber

With Allah’s permission we sing this sad song
Four pieces of rope begin to be joined up (to bear the corpse)
Allah tonight
Allah we dance
Allah we dance
Allah in the palace
Allah we dance

Hear the following story
On Friday night the earthquake began
The second earthquake was on Saturday night
The earthquake happened after Maghrib prayers
Our souls are contained in our bodies
Our lives are without any shorter time
When the time comes (Allah) takes our lives back
From our bodies soon we shall be separated

Music referred to in this article (with transcribed texts and translations) may be heard on the author’s compact disc entitled ‘Muslim Music of Indonesia: Aceh’, which is part of a 16-volume CD set entitled ‘The Music of Islam’ (Executive Producer Eckart Rahn), Celestial Harmonies, 1998, available by e-mail at (celestialharmonies.com) and on internet at http://www.harmonies.com

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