



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLII No. 63

December 1991



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Juliette T. Crump. (1991). Some Features of the Solo Dance that Maintain its Viability for Tribes in Transition in Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLII (63): 159-180

SOME FEATURES OF THE SOLO DANCE THAT MAINTAIN ITS VIABILITY FOR TRIBES IN TRANSITION IN SARAWAK

Juliette T. Crump

(University of Montana)

INTRODUCTION

Efforts are being made to preserve Sarawak's heritage of indigenous dances through tourism and community competitions, but most dances have lost their former functions in the value systems of their tribal cultures. The solo dance currently performed by male and female Orang Ulu, particularly Penan, is an exception to this tendency. An examination of the solo warrior dance and the female solo dance reveals features which reinforce traditional and contemporary values of identity, unity, strength and presence. Using the research method of Laban Movement Analysis we can place many elements of the solo dance in new contexts, meanings and aesthetic purposes that substantiate ethnic values. Most Orang Ulu, or upriver natives, are in transition because of government efforts to develop Sarawak. It is encouraging that they are finding their dancing a relevant means of expressing the effects of that transition. A new and different dance analysis is, therefore, intended to further new understanding of a threatened culture.

SOME FEATURES OF THE SOLO DANCE THAT MAINTAIN ITS VIABILITY FOR TRIBES IN TRANSITION IN SARAWAK

by

Juliette T. Crump
(*University of Montana*)

INTRODUCTION

Efforts are being made to preserve Sarawak's heritage of indigenous dances through tourism and community competitions, but most dances have lost their former functions in the value systems of their tribal cultures. The solo dance currently performed by male and female Orang Ulu, particularly Penan, is an exception to this tendency. An examination of the solo warrior dance and the female solo dance reveals features which reinforce traditional and contemporary values of identity, unity, strength and presence. Using the research method of Laban Movement Analysis we can place many elements of the solo dance in new contexts, meanings and aesthetic purposes that substantiate ethnic values. Most Orang Ulu, or upriver natives, are in transition because of government efforts to develop Sarawak. It is encouraging that they are finding their dancing a relevant means of expressing the effects of that transition. A new and different dance analysis is, therefore, intended to further new understanding of a threatened culture.

Methodology: Movement Analysis

Laban Movement Analysis, or LMA, entails observing, analyzing and describing the qualitative aspects of movement which give it a particular expression. It is a research method devised by Rudolph Laban in Germany and England from the 1930s to the 1950s and more fully developed in the 1980s by Irmgard Bartenieff and others in the United States. LMA uses the parameters of space, time, weight and flow (continuity) to examine effortful action in dance, work movements or play. LMA investigates the degree to which the performer is attentive to environment in terms of these parameters: did the performer focus on single points in space or did focus meander, taking in several points at once; did the action have a sense of urgency to it or was it sustained over a long period of time; how was the body weight activated: did it resist gravity to become light

or did it use gravity and become strong; was the action continuous and ongoing or was it held and bound up? The system of LMA also takes into account how the body shapes itself in relation to the space around it. These are some of the fundamental principles involved in the LMA system used to examine the solo dance of the Orang Ulu. More interpretive considerations will be presented later.

Methodology: Aesthetic Analysis

"The context in which a dance appears, and the purposes it serves, of necessity bear a relationship to ... [cultural] values, reinforcing them or subverting them." (Adshead, 27)

The meaning of the solo dance was interpreted by correlating the symbolic references suggested in the dance to other art forms of the Orang Ulu, their beliefs and customs and to environmental motifs found in artifacts.

Methodology: Field and Bibliographic Research

"Participation/observation" and viewing videotapes and films uncovered examples of preservation, change or disappearance of Sarawak dances. Of all the Orang Ulu, the Penan of Sarawak provided the best case to study. Once the most nomadic and, even when settled, the least agricultural of tribes, they are being forced by logging concessions to move out of the virgin rainforest and to settle in designated areas, kampongs or longhouses. Are their dances changing?

Several days were spent with Penan at Long Bangan and Sungai Ulat Apoh observing and participating in their daily activities, as well as in a special dance party at Sungai Ulat Apoh involving the whole group: guests (4 Americans), a guide and Penan of all ages. A videotape was made as a record of their dancing the solo dance, or *Saga* as it is called by the Kenyah, neighbors to the Penan [Kenyah dialect is close to Penan dialect].

Later interviews were conducted at Uma Sakai, a "longhouse for outsiders" or guesthouse in Marudi. An English-speaking Penan from Long Benali, named Rose, responded to questions and interpreted conversation from other visitors, including a Penan headman, Kurau Kusing, from Long Kidah. Interviews were also done with guides on two trips upriver, one on the Tutoh River and one on the Baram. "Johnny" was our guide to the Penan at Long Bangan and Sungei Ulat Apoh, Tutoh, and Johannes Luwat accompanied us to Long San, Long Anap and Long Palai, on the middle Baram River. Both are Kenyah.

After reviewing live performances and videotapes of many indigenous Sarawak dance, the *Saga* was chosen for analysis because it seems to be the most widely recognized and widely performed dance among the Kenyah, Kayan, Kajang, Iban, Bidayuh and other Dayaks, as well as among nomadic and non-Malay groups (Malay dance is very different from Dayak dance). Hong distinguishes the term Dyak as: