The art of body percussion and movement in Aceh and its links in countries around the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean

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This paper deals with a little-studied but widely practised mode of music-making with body movement throughout the world: body percussion, i.e., musical sound performed by clapping, beating, snapping, slapping, or tapping on one’s body parts, or another’s, or on another surface.¹ The study locale is the Indonesian/Sumatran province of Aceh (‘the gateway to Mecca’), the peoples of whom have a reputation for a strong commitment to Islam, gender segregation in life and the arts, and a fiercely proud, warlike history. Body percussion (peh badan, Ac.) is a quintessential part of the people’s construct of their artistic identity, which is Muslim, based on gender segregation, and with many performances that possess a military-like quality of precision and virtuosity, ranging from the fiery, fast and brilliant to the tragic or calm. The remarkable Acehnese art of body percussion (peh badan, Acehnese) is an important component of their worldly and religious performing arts.² Lying on the cusp of music and dance, it is a quintessential representation of their construct of artistic identity.

The relevant dances divide into the standing and the sitting (actually kneeling) categories, with the male form of the seudati song-dance genre (which has a mainly pre-Muslim, animist or secular character) exemplifying the former and the female meuseukat (which has a mixed secular-Muslim character) the latter. Most of the ‘sitting’ mystical-religious genres (Ac. diké or liké from zikir (Ar.), meaning ‘remembrance of God’, or as the Dutch ethnographer Snouck Hurgronje called them (1906 II: 219), ‘devout recreations’) are accompanied by body movements, with the male forms performed for male audiences and the female forms for female audiences.

This paper will describe the techniques and extra-artistic meanings of some of the two gender-segregated sets of genres employing body percussion techniques, making special reference to the seudati and meuseukat dances and the changes of style and socio-cultural function in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times (the latter from c. 1945). The lead singers in both categories add Bismillah and other Muslim greetings and phrases at the beginnings and ends of sections, even in otherwise secular genres.

By any standard, techniques of body percussion sound and movement performed in lowland Aceh and highland Gayo, such as hand clapping, finger snapping, breast beating, shoulder tapping and foot stamping are highly developed, often very fast and virtuosic, and performed in quite elaborate musical compositions and choreographies, as the DVD episodes that I shall present will show.

¹ Technically, body percussion excludes sounds made by beating one part of the human body on an inanimate surface, such as a floor or an inanimate musical instrument; e.g., it excludes stamping. However, since these sounds/movements are taught in Aceh along with the body percussion techniques, they are included in the legend below (Fig 2) under the heading of ‘quasi-body percussion.’ Another example of quasi-body percussion is shoe stamping on a hard surface, as in flamenco dancing.
² They include the Acehnese, Gayo, Aneuk Jamee and other smaller ethnic groups.
The dances, performed mainly in single or parallel lines, squares or concentric squares and circles or concentric circular formations, contain body percussion sounds and movements that result from beating or tapping (peh), clapping (pokpok jaroe), snapping the fingers (geuteb jaroe) and stamping (geudam) the feet: and those types break into the beating of (i) the lower shoulder(s) (peh bahoe); (ii) the breast(s) (peh dada); (iii) the thigh(s) (peh paha); (iv) the knee-cap(s) (peh teuot); (v) the floor (peh aleue); (vi) the hand(s) (i.e., clapping: pokpok jaroe); (vii) snapping the fingers (keuteb jaroe); and (viii) stamping the feet (geudam gaki), where the latter is actually a form of quasi body-percussion, as it involves only one body part. In strictly gender-segregated Aceh, men and women perform separate dances in separate arenas; Acehnese religious ethics forbids men from performing with women or even watching women perform, and vice versa. Breast beating by female dancers is likewise forbidden—shoulder(s) or upper breast(s) tapping is substituted instead.

Yet some technically related techniques are also found among musician-dancers in parts of the Muslim world from the Arab peninsula, Iraq, Iran, India and Malaysia to Aceh and West Sumatra in Indonesia, and along the rim of the Mediterranean from Turkey to Berber-Morocco, and even in flamenco dancing in Spain. In the Middle East and some southern Mediterranean Muslim areas, hand clapping and foot stamping music accompany song and dance genres similar to Aceh’s in the Yemen, Aden, Hadramaut and Oman as well as some Muslim areas such as in Morocco, the High Atlas mountains, and Egypt. We cannot be sure that Aceh did not develop its remarkable body percussion genres in cultural isolation, but given the fact that harbour-towns in Aceh (and nearby Barus) served as ports of call by ships from Perso-Arabic countries for well over a millennium, and large numbers of Acehnese pilgrims have visited the holy land over many centuries, the possibility that its body percussion forms developed in part from transplanted models is quite strong.

The most significant and spectacular form of body percussion in Aceh is the breast beating, in which male seudati dancers—a traditional secular genre with Muslim elements added—produce a set of magnificent, sharp sounds by clapping one or both hands on the lower breast or breasts (actually, the highest ribs) in between finger snapping episodes, performed by Syeh Lah Geunta.

The origin of this breast-beating practice is unknown, but some Acehnese dance specialists believe it derived from the religious form of breast beating still practised by mourning men in Shi’a areas of Iran and Iraq between the first and the tenth of the month of Muharram, including in the taziyeh theatre. Indeed, the male breast beating in the seudati dance may be a remnant of the times when Shi’a brotherhoods were strong in Aceh (i.e., in the fourteenth and eighteenth-nineteenth centuries). However, the

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3 In the zapin dance in Malay-speaking areas of Indonesia and Malaysia, the tepuk silat dance motive involves hand clapping and stamping (Mohd Anis Md Noor 1993:79).
4 For reasons of space this paper will not refer to the body percussion found in islands in the Pacific Ocean, Aboriginal Australia, mainland Southeast Asia and elsewhere, and the Appalachian gumboot dancing and children’s games in many parts of the world.
5 Shi’ism has been the state religion in Iran from around 1501 until now, except between 1722-1747, when Sunni Afghans overthrew the Safavids and a Sunni Shah took power. Before 1501 Shi’a and Sunni brotherhoods were widespread both in Iran and Aceh, and there was a period of Shi’a rule in Iran and Iraq in the eleventh century. In the eleventh century ‘various sects of Shi’ism gathered great numerical strength in medieval Syria, southern Iraq, and eastern Arabia, as well as some towns in Iran and Iraq.’ (Juan Cole (2002), and pers. comm. from Gay Breyley).
standing and stepping dance, *seudati*, has long been—and remains to this day—a secular dance associated with agricultural practices.

**Pre-Muslim and Muslim Associations of Body Percussive Dances**

Some Acehnese believe that their body percussion originated in Aceh itself, while others think it was transplanted from outside, while yet others think it originated in Aceh and developed under the influence of foreign genres brought back by pilgrims from the Holy Land. The second group believe that their body percussion may have developed from Persian, Mughal or Arabic *ratêb* (*Ar. ratib*) models introduced by a series of mystics and teachers of mysticism who are remembered in Aceh to this day. The sitting genres can transform its male participants into a state of trance-like religious concentration, induce a joyous feeling of unity with the divine, and seem to bring the world into a state of harmony. They were developed centuries ago to help spread Islam in village communities throughout Aceh, while the standing dances were given an acceptable Muslim aura by adding religious expressions and texts. In Aceh, the *zikir* or *ratêb*-derived genres such as *ratêb meuseukat* and *ratêb saman Gayo* have some religious and some secular texts, but they are not religiously transformative. They are more worldly and performance-oriented, and serve mainly to entertain an audience, whether at a wedding or other *kanduri* or—from at least as early as the mid- to late-19th century—at a competition, or in the post-colonial era, a festival. The *dikê* or *likê* are more religious in content and intent (*Djajadiningrat 1934*). Governments, including the Dutch colonial power (c. 1873-c.1941) and the Indonesian nation state (1945-), as well as the leaders of orthodox religious movements (*ulama*), corporations, and the electronic media have appropriated the genres at various times in order to entertain their guests and legitimate their rule.

**Body Percussion Arts around the Rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean**

The Acehnese body percussion genres superficially resemble genres practised in some other Muslim regions around the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. As the recent tsunami disaster emphasised, Aceh’s fate is linked to that of countries along the northern rim of the Indian Ocean, from whence Muslim traders and others visited or settled in Aceh from possibly as early as the eighth century CE, and with Aceh’s first Muslim kingdoms at Peureulak and Pasai (in present-day northern Aceh) being established from the 1390s. There is also documentary evidence that from at least as early as the 11th century CE merchants from Egypt and India carried out trade along the great post-Roman era trade route between the Mediterranean and Southeast

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6 Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1906).
7 The evidence indicates that from c. the 7th century CE, Sufi-style genres called by the umbrella term *zikir* (lit. ‘remembrance of Allah’) developed in the Perso-Arabic world. To this day it is intoned by soloists and groups, with or without physical exercises and body percussion. It is regarded as a devotional exercise, not an art, but from it have derived several artistic genres involving vocal music and body percussion, including in Aceh. The other religious genres, such as *sifeut* (reciting the characteristics of Allah), *rukon* (reciting the principles of Islam), *dalail khairat* (reciting the main religious teachings) and Qu’ran reading, are not regarded as art forms either, though worshippers sometimes include body movement and clapping in their devotions.
Asia---in particular, in the port of Barus (on the northwest coast of Sumatra), 8 probably involving people and produce from what is now known as Aceh.

In medieval times, Islam came to Southeast Asia---including Aceh---largely by way of India and Persia, thus acquiring ‘mystical elements that fitted it to operate within the Indonesian setting’ (Legge 1964:49), including various Sunni and Shi’a sects and brotherhoods. 9 From the early 18th century, however, Wahhabi and Salafi branches of Islam came to influence Aceh and neighbouring western areas of Sumatra through religious teachers and merchants hailing not only from the Hejaz (the land of Medina and Mecca), but also the Hadhramaut and Oman (and other Gulf areas), including Shi’ite pearl fishers from the Gulf who lived along the famous spice route between Europe and south, southeast and east Asia (Cole 2005: 52). 10 In the nineteenth century CE, there was a continual flow of Hadhramis from the Hadhramaut, present-day Yemen and the nearby port of Aden to Southeast Asia (Meulen and Wissman 1964). Meulen described long rows of male and female dancers in the 1930s facing each other ‘with rhythmical stamping of feet and clapping of hands…united in the singing of a monotonous [sic] refrain, the constant repetition of one and the same melody. The actual song is recited by a single person…Sweat pours down the naked chests of the men, but it is nearly morning before their energy is exhausted and the festal joy quietens down’ (Meulen and Wissmann 1964:93). A ‘beduin dance’ was performed at a wedding by ‘all present in two long rows, singing while clapping and stamping’ (ibid. 48). In Aceh performers often dance in single or double rows (although they differ in that if there are two rows they face the front, not each other).

**Classification of the Genres and Body Percussion Techniques**

Body percussion genres divide into two groups---one, performed in duek (sitting, kneeling) position as if at prayers, and the other performed in dong (standing, stepping) position, having a background of ancestor and nature-spirit veneration and ritual, though it is currently mainly secular in character plus a few added Muslim phrases. In the strictly gender-segregated culture of Aceh, the genres also divide into two types on gender grounds. The body percussion genres (*jeuneh peh badan*) are classified in the culture 11 as in Figure 1 below.

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8 In his 1973 book on the medieval Egyptian-Jewish Genizah papers that he translated and interpreted, Goitein (1973:227, 228) refers to 11th century Jewish traders from Alexandria buying camphor in the port of Fansur, now Barus.

9 That Acehnese Islam was not just the orthodox Sunni variety but also had Shi’a elements in the 14th and 18th-19th centuries (with some elements persisting to this day) is documented in the belletristic literature and in Dutch colonial sources. For example, colonial sources refer to the passionate spectacle from Persia and north India called *tabut* (*tabot*) *Hasan Husen*, which was transplanted to Bengkulu and other west and north coast towns of Sumatra---including Kota Raja and Pidie in Aceh---approximately three centuries ago from British North India, and had such an impact in some areas that aspects of it---e.g. its drumming and dirge singing---were absorbed into hinterland cultures (Kartomi 1986: 141-62).

10 See Cole (2005:37), who writes: ‘The Shi’ites of Bahrain, Qatif, and Al-Hasa dwelled along the renowned spice route from South and East Asia to Europe.’

11 This classification, which is implicit in the language and culture, is constructed on the basis of discussions with many *syèh, aneuq syahè* and other artists in the field.
Male and female genres each have their own titles, preferred body percussion movements, choreographies and sung legends, but are otherwise similar. In rural areas, males traditionally perform male (agam) genres for male audiences and females perform female (inong) genres for female audiences. In both colonial and post-colonial times, performances of the male standing dance, seudati, were often discouraged by the ulama who tried to ban them because of their often brazen improvised texts, their audiences allegedly breaking the rule of strict gender segregation, and their rivalry with the chieftains (ulèëbalang), who promoted seudati, as a power group. Female performances (seudati inong, also akoom\(^{12}\)) were popular at official or family functions organised or approved by the local chieftains. The ulama also discouraged female performances and practices for ostensibly moral reasons.\(^{13}\) Banned in the rebellious Darul Islam insurgency during the early days of the Indonesian Republic, including the first Festival of Acehnese Arts (Pekan Kebudayaan Aceh, PKA I) in 1952, performances were allowed again after seudati inong had been given the more pious name of laweuet (from salaweuet, ‘prayers to the prophet’) and performed at PKA II in 1972. Many ulama were still teaching that it is immodest and irreligious for females to appear on stage for mixed audiences. Although the pious still say that the sexes should never mix on stage or in an audience, men and women often do so anyway today, as in the recent mass dances performed with body percussion at political rallies, festivals and pop-style venues, such as the Arts Festival in Lhok Seumawe in early 2003 and in the Festival of Acehnese Arts (Pekan Kebudayaan Aceh IV) held in Banda Aceh in 2004.

\(^{12}\) Burhan & Idris 1986-7: 124.

\(^{13}\) Snouck (The Achehnese, vol. II, 1906: 219) wrote in detail about a male sadâti (seudati) performance but gave no data on the female equivalent, though he wrote that ‘The women had a ratèb Saman of their own’ (ibid.). Indeed, his brief references indicate that a substantial female performing art culture existed at the time.
The third level of the above classification breaks into the main male standing genre on the one hand and the female standing genres on the other, with the latter including the *seudati inong* or *laweuet* and the female *phô* dance (for which there is no male equivalent), while the male sitting genre comprises the *ratèb /ratoh duek* or *saman* and the female sitting genre comprises the *meuseukat* dance.

**The repertoire of body percussion sounds/movements**

At the first level of division the techniques of body percussion sounds/movements are classified in the culture according to the manner of exciting sound, like the dominant classification of musical instruments in Aceh (and many other societies). The main categories are the beaten (*peh*), the clapped (*pok-pok*), the snapped (*keutèb*), and the stamped (*geudam*). A list of the main body percussive sounds and movements, with their names and some possible musical notation symbols, is presented in Figure 2.

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**Figure 2: Legend of body percussion: notation symbols and their names**

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14 Musical instruments are usually classified, ignoring body percussion, into vibrating idiophones (self-sounding objects), membranophones (drums), chordophones (strings) and aerophones (winds). Although Olson (1986) suggested another category – corpophones – be added, such ‘body-sounders’ do not need a separate category as they are classifiable according to mode of sound excitation (e.g., snapped, stamped), musical role, etc., cf Aceh’s main classification of musical instruments (Kartomi 2005).

15 The list of the main movements, which does not claim to be complete (as new ones continue to be invented), is compiled from the author’s observations of rehearsals, live performances and video recordings of performances.
As detailed in this figure, the first – ‘beaten’ or ‘tapped’ - category includes seven single and four double sounds/movements listed from head to toe: i.e., hand(s) beating the lower shoulder(s) (peh bahoë), hand(s) beating the breast(s) (peh dada)---actually the lowest rib(s) for males or the lower shoulders or flat upper breast(s) for females;\(^{17}\) tapping an elbow (peh singkè---only one at a time) with the opposite hand, tapping the knee(s) (peh teuot) with the hand(s); tapping one backside (peh punggung) with the hand; hand-beating the outer lateral or front thigh(s) (peh pah), and hand-beating a hand or hands on the floor (peh aleue) or the ground. The second category, hand clapping (keutèb jaroe), includes (i) vertical clapping of one cupped hand down on the other and (ii) horizontal hand clapping, with hands held vertically and clapping each other by horizontal movement. The third category, finger snapping (peutik jaroe), is performed by pressing the third finger down hard on the thumb tip then allowing it to slip down to hit the base of the thumb, with the compressed pocket of air within exploding to produce a sharp cracking sound. Single or double finger snapping (in both hands) is usually performed with the arms either bent upwards at upper chest level or outstretched.

In addition there are five kinds of quasi-body-percussion sounds (see Figure 2) produced by beating a human body part on an inanimate surface, such as a floor, and including in the fourth category three kinds of foot stamping (gendam gaki) and two kinds of floor beating (peh aleue). Finally, two kinds of silent shoulder-shrugging movements (nyet and nyap) that are normally taught with the body percussion techniques are listed.

While some techniques are common to all genres, others are genre-specific, such as stamping in the female phô genre, breast beating in the male seudati, and shoulder (or upper chest) tapping in the female meuseukat and male ratoh duek/saman. Some body percussion techniques are combined with certain silent body movements, such as repeatedly turning one’s head and neck and throwing one’s head and shock of hair to the right, left and centre; this movement is called geleng (B.I., neck-turning). These geleng sections may be preceded and followed by long episodes of repetitive or interlocking group hand clapping or floor tapping movements in various rhythmic sequences. A choreographer may decide to add other sounding movements in lieu of or as well as those mentioned, though normally s/he chooses a limited palette of sounds for a particular piece.

Finger snapping is common in the standing genres, sometimes doubling stamping, and rarer in the dances performed in sitting position, when a choreographer desires to insert more rhythmic and timbral variety. In a male or female seudati performance

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\(^{16}\) A performer taps or beats only one or the other elbow, backside and floor area at a time (i.e. three single sounds/movements), but can beat one or both of the lower shoulders (with crossed arms), upper or lower breasts (with parallel arms), knees and thighs (i.e. four single or double sounds/movements).

\(^{17}\) Use of the term peh dada (breast beating) for females is a contentious matter, raising a laugh or embarrassment when it is discussed, in my experience. Some choreographers use the term peh dada for both men and women, meaning thereby ‘lower chest beating’ for the men and ‘upper chest or lower shoulder beating’ for the women, while others substitute the term peh bahu - shoulder tapping - for peh dada - breast beating, in the case of the women. Daud et al refer interchangeably to female peh bahu and peh dada in their descriptions of (female) meuseukat dancing, though their drawings of the two movements show they mean beating the same area – the upper breast alias the lower shoulder, whether they call it peh bahu or peh dada (Daud 1994-95: 19, 20). As mention of female breasts seems currently to be taboo in Aceh, I have used only the term peh bahu in my discussions and Legend.
finger snapping is the basic body percussive sound/technique. The lead musician-dancer uses it to set up and signal changes in tempo. Like shoulder, breast, and knee cap tapping/beating, it may be performed with the left hand, the right hand, or both hands simultaneously, the latter of which may be called ‘double finger snapping’. In male seudati it is often performed in virtuoso interlocking patterns between jaggedly irregular rhythmic breast beats, and in male and female seudati when accompanying group singing. The single and double sound production techniques themselves are carefully taught and must be painstakingly learnt and practised by all prospective musician-dancers in order to achieve a sharp quality of sound with a ringing resonance. To snap the fingers a performer presses his/her fleshy upper third finger of one hand down on the small of the upper palm of the thumb, thereby creating an air pocket; then s/he allows the thumb to fall away to force the upper third finger to hit down on the fleshy base of the thumb, producing an explosive sound when the compressed air in the pocket is released.

According to the late musician Bp Abdullah Raja (pers. comm., 1982), finger snapping, clapping and breast beating parallel the main playing techniques/sounds on the rapa’i geurimpheng (medium-size frame drums). A well-produced, pleasant body percussion sound, like that of a rapa’i, he said, should be loud, sharp and high-pitched, but it may also be clear and of medium resonance and pitch, or deeply resonant and low-pitched, or be a gradation between those three sounds. He also said that the later the hour the more beautiful and exciting the body percussion episodes sound to players and listeners alike. As he and other musicians have mentioned, the finger snapping sound is comparable to the high-pitched undamped sound produced by beating near the taut edge of a rapa’i frame drum head; it is given the onomatopoeic name of preung in Greater Aceh, or ceureung or peureung in North Aceh. Similarly the percussive hand-clapping sound, which is produced by exploding the compressed air pocket between a pair of slightly curved hands clapped vertically or horizontally together, is comparable to a medium-pitched damped sound on a rapa’i and called peureuk in North Aceh.

Aesthetically, the most admired male sound is the peh dada (lower breast beat for men only), produced in standing or stepping positions by clapping one’s slightly curved right hand on the right lower breast (actually on top of the lowest right-hand rib) or left hand on the left breast (lowest rib) in relaxed fashion. Before impact, the dancer stretches out one or both hands in order to achieve maximum effect with minimal effort as he brings his hand(s) swiftly down to beat both the bony upper part and the soft fleshy underbelly part of his lower breast(s). The largest cavity of air in the human body---in the chest and lungs---acts as a sounding board amplifying and deepening the timbre of the sound produced by the impact. Clearly in a lengthy male seudati performance a player cannot afford to beat his breast(s) too hard, despite wanting to produce a beautifully loud, resonant sound; but it is actually not necessary to do so. After learning exactly how best to strike the breast to achieve a sound of maximum intensity, he can perform for hours with minimal pain or fatigue. In the past two decades the agile male dancers have worn shirts of thin cloth so that when beating their chests, the sweaty film between the cloth and their body enables them to produce a sharp, undamped sound of maximal amplitude and effectiveness.18

18 Fashions change, however. In 1982 when I recorded seudati performances in the Pidie area, the dancers preferred to wear thick cotton shirts despite the fact that they made them sweat profusely, because the sounds thereby produced had greater volume and carrying power. On the other hand, in some village
Figure 3: Male *seudati* dancer performing *peh dada*.
Drawing by Iwan Dzulvan Amir.

Some musicians compare the male *peh dada* sound to the low bass sound produced by beating the middle section of a frame drum head, which is referred to onomatopoeically in Great Aceh as *tum* or *geudum*, and in North Aceh as *meugeuntong gum*. The breast-beating sound is associated with manliness and heroism and may lead up to a climactic *tangan seribu* (B.I., ’a thousand hands’) episode, in which the troupe members’ fast-moving hands beat one or both breasts for extended periods, sometimes alternating with bouts of thigh beating. Budiardjo, the State Minister of Culture in the early 1960s, is reputed to have invented this term as he watched an amazingly fast body percussion display; and the term, though in Indonesian and not Acehnese, stuck.

The vigorous-sounding body movements of the male sitting genres also have a symbiotic as well as analogous relationship with frame drum (*rapa’i*) playing, which is widespread in Aceh and similarly associated with both pantheistic and Muslim beliefs. Body percussion performers are often frame drum players too, employing similar musical rhythms, timbres and structures, taking a fluid approach to tempo and dynamic performances men wore only trousers and sarongs without shirts and beat their bare breasts (Syèh La Bangguna, pers. comm., April, 2005).

19 For a discussion of these onomatopoeic names of frame drum sounds see Kartomi (2004:51).

20 Beliefs surrounding the making and ownership of a *rapa’i* and other heirlooms are pantheistic and ancestor venerating, though sometimes adapted in a subtly Islamised form, as shown in a recent description of the making of a venerable frame drum (Daham 2003:4.). Despite the disapproval of the *ulama*, use of herbal medicines and magic to cure sickness, and of magic to control dangerous animals is still prevalent in rural Aceh.

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change, and frequently building up to a frenzied excitement then relaxing into repose. Some male troupes alternate between playing body percussion and frame drum episodes in the one performance. In a highly virtuoso performance of *rapa’i pulot* that I witnessed in Sigli in 1982, the artists sang and played their frame drums, then placed them on the floor and performed extended passages of interlocking body percussion, continuing to alternate in this way with further episodes of solo poetry singing, *rapa’i* playing and body percussion. Indeed, the fact that body percussion and frame drums are interchangeable was movingly brought home to me at a rehearsal of a song in Banda Aceh four months after the tsunamis struck Aceh’s coastlines in December 2004. All the players’ frame drums had been swept away. They said they had normally accompanied this particular song on their frame drums, but that since the tsunamis they had performed it on their bodies. The resulting sounds and rhythms indeed closely resembled the *rapa’i geurimpheng* accompaniment to the song, a recording of which I heard.

Like the male genres, the ideal sounding movements and songs in the female standing genres are heroic, ‘high-spirited and fiery, in accordance with the history and daily life of Acehnese society’; however, an ideal female performance may also express ‘refinement and softness’. Female *seudati* performances feature the same palette of sounding movements as the male, except that they replace the male lower breast beating by female clapping or thigh beating and the women also beat their outer hips (B.I., *pinggul sebelah luar*).

The standing female *phô* musician-dancers minimally perform two kinds of horizontal clapping, three kinds of finger snapping, and most distinctively for this genre, left or right foot stamping or tapping in cyclic rhythms; meanwhile they move in a circle around their *syèh* or in other formations, usually doubling their stamping with finger snapping to heighten the group stamping sound. In the female *seudati* dance they focus on shoulder tapping, thigh beating, finger snapping and clapping. In the sitting dances, both sexes focus on clapping their hands and their neighbours’ hands, beating their thighs, tapping their kneecaps and beating their hand(s) on the floor.

Partly different combinations of sounding movements are used in genres such as *meuseukat* and *ratoh duek* that are performed in sitting position. They include the horizontal clapping of one’s own hands followed by the clapping of a neighbouring dancer’s hand; finger snapping in one or both hands with the body assuming various positions; tapping the right palm or fingers on the left elbow then the left on the right elbow (*peh singkè*) in repetitive sequence; tapping the fingers just above the right or left knee cap or both; repeatedly beating the left hand on the right lower shoulder followed by the right hand on the left lower shoulder; and beating crossed hands on the lower shoulders. The sitting genres have a much greater variety of types of body percussive

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21 *Rapa’i pulot* is a genre of religious and secular vocal music, frame drum playing and body percussion [often with acrobatics] performed by competitive male teams (described in Kartomi *ibid.*, pp. 68-72), especially in Great Aceh and along the north coast. In 1982 it was still very popular in the Pidie area of Aceh. Snouck Hurgronje (1906) referred to a partly different genre as *rapa’i pulet* (spelling from another dialect).

22 Isjkarim et al., (1980-81:38). The text reads, ‘...adanya semangat yang tinggi dan berkobar-kobar, sesuai dengan latar belakang sejarah dan perikehiduran masyarakat Aceh’. In the same source, ‘refinement and softness’ is rendered as ‘kelemah gemulaian dan kelemah lembutan’, *ibid*.

23 *Ibid*.

sounds/movements than the standing genres, as if to compensate for the fact that in the former only two of the four major limbs are used.

All these sounding movements are combined in various sequences in the standard genres as well as in new works (kreasi baru) that are choreographed for a variety of ritual and ritualised functions and are sometimes tailored to fit a particular occasion, such as a wedding.

Body Percussion Genres in Aceh cf. Some Muslim Countries around the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean

Finally, I shall briefly refer to body percussion practised in some Muslim regions around the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean in order to place the Acehnese genres in relief. As the recent tsunami disaster emphasised, Aceh’s fate is linked to that of countries along the northern rim of the Indian Ocean, from whence Muslim traders and others visited or settled in Aceh from possibly as early as the eighth century CE, and with Aceh’s first Muslim kingdoms at Peureulak and Pasai (in present-day northern Aceh) being established from the 1390s. There is also documentary evidence that from at least as early as the 11th century CE merchants from Egypt and India carried out trade along the great post-Roman era trade route between the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia---in particular, in the port of Barus (on the northwest coast of Sumatra), probably involving people and produce from what is now known as Aceh.

Conclusion

According to some Acehnese artists, Acehnese, Aneuk Jamee and Gayo body percussion could have originated and developed in Aceh and Gayo areas themselves; certainly its forms are unique and are believed to be the result of centuries of development in the province itself. However, the broad similarity of some of its movements and genres to those in some other Muslim areas, and the fact that the accompanying song texts often comprise or refer to Muslim themes, suggest to others that aspects of body percussion were originally introduced centuries ago from other parts of the Muslim world, after which a number of unique genres and styles developed in Aceh and Gayo on the basis of indigenous forms. Yet others adhere to the belief that both indigenous and foreign influences are responsible. The fact that Aceh’s body percussion genres are so well-developed, varied, brilliantly virtuoso, and have reached such a peak of development in the 20th and 21st centuries is due partly to the people’s competitive spirit and their love of organised competitions between troupes. Certainly the competitions constantly stimulate the solo vocalists to create erudite or humorous and other surprising texts which they sing to freely embellished melodies; and they also induce the syeh and their groups of singer-dancers (rakan) to respond to the solo singers’ renditions with novel sounds, rhythms, movements, choreographies and costumes, continually amazing their audiences with the precision and compactness of their dancing, sudden stops and starts, and constant changes from slow to very fast tempi.

25 In his 1973 book on the medieval Egyptian-Jewish Genizah papers that he translated and interpreted, Goitein (1973:227, 228) refers to 11th century Jewish traders from Alexandria buying camphor in the port of Fansur, now Barus, in northwest Sumatra.
In this author’s view, the art of body percussion has reached a peak of development and significance in Acehnese and Gayo cultures that is rarely matched anywhere else in the world. Perhaps the techniques of finger snapping, clapping and foot-stamping in flamenco dancing is equally virtuosic in its own way, but Acehnese virtuosity lies in the deft interlocking of body percussion movement and sounds between members of a group who perform identical or alternately identical parts. I conclude this paper with a call to other scholars to carry out comparative research into body percussion across the Muslim and non-Muslim cultures of the world so that a satisfactory theory of its nature can eventually be developed.

References