

# Gusmiati Suid & Gumarang Sakti: Moving Forward with Tradition <sup>1</sup>

BY SAL MURGIYANTO

*Gusmiati Suid (1942-2001), a vital figure in Indonesian contemporary dance, made her choreographic debut in 1979 at the second Young Choreographers Festival organized by the Jakarta Arts Council. Eight years later, she migrated to Jakarta to pursue a performing and choreographic career, and reestablished the Gumarang Sakti Dance Company, which continues to prosper under the direction of Boi G. Sakti, Ms. Suid's only son. This paper traces the career of Ms. Suid and her struggle to reinterpret the heritage of Minangkabau (a region of West Sumatra) through her contemporary work. Two characteristics that connect Gusmiati's work to Minangkabau traditions are the ways in which her dances are guided by adat (local custom) and syarak (Islamic rules).*



## Introduction <sup>2</sup>

The light dims. Three men clasping a rattan pole with a hook at one end stand up straight. They wear maroon loose-fitting *galembong* trousers paired with white T-shirts. In front of them lies a young woman wearing the same *galembong*, but dressed in a yellow bra top. Silence slices the heart. The sorrowful sounds of the *saluang* (bamboo flute) and the clanging *canang* (gong-chimes) linger in the air. The three dancers move at top speed while the woman rolls to the front of the stage. The atmosphere of the Minang region gains strength not only from the steps of *silek* (or *silek tuo*, a martial art) movements and the sounds of musical instruments in the background, but also from the dialogue between the dancers and the musicians.

I found this note, among a scattered pile of books, archives, and documents left ruined by the floods that struck Jakarta in January and February 2002, when I visited my house in February 2002. I wrote it after watching *Menggantang Asap (Catching the Smoke)*, a dance by Gusmiati Suid that premiered at the Gedung Kesenian Jakarta on 19 August 2000, a year before she left us forever. Even if that small note had been washed away, the imagery of the blunt movements and emotion portrayed in them would remain. Later, I read the next paragraph:

The dark sneaks in. The back screen is lifted together with the strong light, uncovering the images of a Minang *kampung* (village) in the hinterlands: bamboo trees, *bagongjong* houses, bonfires, and long bamboo benches. Soon the strength of Gusmiati as a choreographer emerges. Four dancers with supple bodies—occasionally flirting” with the audience—present

visually beautiful rhythms as they perform their highly skilled techniques. Flying bodies land lightly and securely in each other's graceful catch. A dancer tiptoes precisely on the repeated speedy beats of the *bedug* (large drum used in mosques) while others break the time with sharp and uniform movements.

Expressing experiences, observations, feelings, and imaginings through words or nonverbal symbols are outlets everyone needs. For a choreographer, the problem of how to express oneself through artistic movements requires intuitive sensitivity and intelligence. This is exactly where Gusmiati excelled. Her work, shaped from shrewd observations and experiences, reflects the interaction between the soul of the choreographer and the real world around her. Supported by the physical skills of her dancers and their awareness of the underlying themes in her work, the result is more than just an imitation of nature, or a repetition or manipulation of other dances. The work of Gusmiati has integrity and originality, even dignity.

*Menggantang Asap* is a sequel to two previous works, *Api dalam Sekam* (*Fire in the Chaff*, 1998) and *Asa di Ujung Tanduk* (*Hope on the Tip of A Buffalo's Horn*, 1997). The trilogy evokes the anxiety, even desperation, that Gusmiati felt observing events in the country she loved so much. In these three works, the sounds and elements of *pencak-silat* (local martial arts-based dance movement) contribute to the dominant atmosphere of the Minangkabau. These things are not idiosyncratic to Gusmiati; they are what differentiate the creative process of many contemporary Indonesian choreographers from their counterparts in the West. In their creative process, Indonesian choreographers encounter a domain, a shared body of conventions, techniques, and historical knowledge, towards which they orient their work, and for Gusmiati this domain is the land, the people, the culture, and history of the Minangkabau as well as the new Indonesia.

## Adat and Syarak

Indonesian culture does not reject its past when something new comes along. Rather, it remembers everything, displaying the new top of the old, as a sort of palimpsest. The dances of the Minangkabau region of West Sumatra reflect this process. While Islam dominates in Minangkabau culture, it is not the only influence. *Adat* (indigenous tradition) is another strong component.<sup>3</sup>

*Adat* refers to a clearly defined body of local customs—thus *adat* will vary from region to region. Before the coming of Islam, the Minang based their conduct and interactions on local *adat*, an important principle of which was that the Minang, both as individuals and as members of a community, should derive their wisdom from natural phenomena. As the famous Minang saying goes, “alam takambang jadi guru” (“nature should be taken as the teacher”).

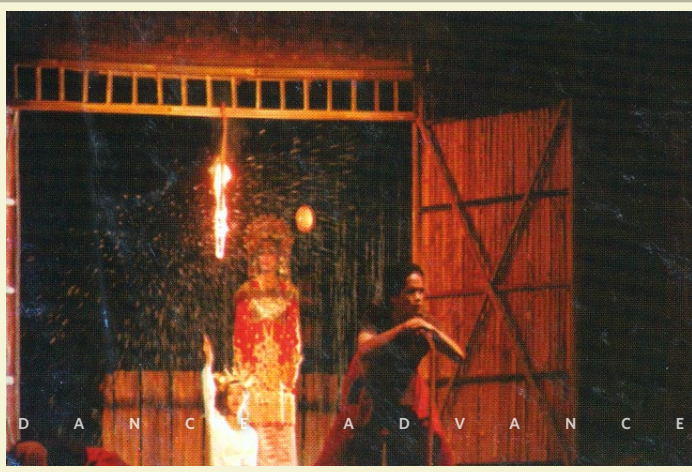
The Minang strongly believe in the continuity of tradition: “*Adat* neither rots in the rain, nor cracks in the sun.” But they also recognize the importance of change: “When a flood comes, the bathing place moves.” Thus, it is implicit to *adat* that it should be constantly renewed and adjusted as times change. These adjustments do not happen in an instant, and not without struggle—as can be seen in the integration of Islamic law (*syarak* or *syari'at*) into *adat*.



The arrival of Islam in Indonesia in the seventeenth century marked the beginning of a new era in Minang history. Yet at first, Islam did not threaten the basic foundation of Minangkabau society. Instead of diminishing the culture, the new elements enriched it. In the second stage of this cultural alliance, *adat* and Islam held equal importance. The relationship between the two was formulated in accordance with a Minang aphorism, “*Adat* is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on *Adat*.” Between 1821 and 1837, however, supporters of *adat* split from followers of Islam. This led to a third cultural stage in which Islam predominated. Since then, the relationship between Islam and *adat* has been redefined as, “*Adat* is based on Islamic law, and Islamic law is based on the Koran and Hadith (Islamic tradition).”

The continuous effort by Minangs—especially men—to renew *adat* is institutionalized through a tradition called *merantau*, according to which a young man (or, now, a young woman) is morally obliged to spend some time away from his (or her) village to seek material wealth or knowledge. This originally meant going to nearby *rantau* (acquired lands), but today *merantau* means leaving West Sumatra for Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or even countries outside of Indonesia. One returns to one’s village full of new cultural experiences and ideas with which to renew *adat*.

Compared to how they view *adat*, the Minang have traditionally characterized their dances as *pameran* (games) or recreational activities “to pass the time.” But in the second half of the twentieth century, the Minang people began to see dance as a serious theatrical art and studied it as a profession in high schools as well as in performing academies such as the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI). Traditionally, dance is practiced as a part of the training of young Minang men to become martial artists. Minang martial art comprises two important aspects: *pencak* and *silat*. *Silat* is self-defense proper, in which the rule is “a kick to break, a catch to kill.” *Pencak*, “the flower of *silat*,” is performed as a show or recreation; the rule is “a kick to be parried and a catch to be disentangled” and it is *pencak* that developed into dance.



In the past, Minang *pencak*-derived dance was performed mostly by men in outdoor settings, in modes that varied slightly from one *nagari* (village) to another. Both women dancing and dance as a theatrical art are recent phenomena here. When young girls in West Sumatra began to dance at the beginning of the twentieth century, they did not perform their own martial arts-based village dances. Instead, they imported Melayu dances from the neighboring provinces of Riau and North Sumatra. At first, this Melayu dance was practiced only by students, both male and female, at the newly introduced Western-oriented Dutch schools. In the early 1950s, however, young Minang people began enthusiastically to perform the new dance outside the school compounds as well. Yet Gusmiati Suid was an exception. Despite the fact that she was a girl, she was obliged, as the family’s only child, to study *silat* from her *mamak* (maternal uncle) in order to preserve the tradition.

## Martial Art, A Minang’s Way of Life

Gusmiati was born on 16 August 1942 in the village of Parak Jua, Batusangkar, West Sumatra. <sup>4</sup> Said Gasim Shahab, her father, was of Arabic descent and Asiah, her mother, was a native Minang. Both were public school teachers. Gusmiati was raised in a devout Moslem family that at the same time held tight to *adat*. As such it was not her father who was responsible for her education, but her *mamak*, the late Wahid Sampono Alam, who was a martial artist.

According to the matrilineal traditions of Minang society, women are responsible for the management of the house and the material wealth of a clan. As such, they spend most of their time in the traditional *rumah gadang* (big house), which belongs to them. (Unlike in the West, her property does not transfer to him upon marriage.) A Minang man, on the other hand, spends most of his time outside the *rumah gadang*, returning there only to eat and sleep with his wife (a man living in his wife's *rumah gadang* is called a *sumando*). As a result, men's lives after working in the rice fields are carried out mostly in the *surau* (village prayer house), in which men practice reciting the Koran, at the *sasaran* (an outdoor open space in which they practice martial arts), and at the food stalls to eat, drink, and chat. Boys learn early about this way of life. From seven years old or even younger, they follow the example of their elders, spending most of their time with friends in the *surau* to learn how to read the Koran and to pray, or in the *sasaran* to practice martial arts.

As outlined above, a Minang man is morally obliged to carry out *merantau* (leave his village) in order to search for material wealth, money, and knowledge to enrich his village. A young man who has never left is considered *baguno balun* ("not useful yet"). In order to protect themselves from robbery and attacks by wild animals, among other dangers on this personal and cultural journey, these young men have to master martial arts skills. In the past, this ethos of venturing into the wild marked the practice of local martial arts—including various other performances and dances—as the provenance of men. Only after the independence of Indonesia in 1945 did Minang girls begin to perform on stage. They began not only to dance but also to practice—in smaller numbers, to be sure—*pencak-silat* (martial arts).

At the age of four, Wahid Sampono Alam, Gusmiati's maternal uncle, insisted she learn *pencak-silat*. "Otherwise," he explained, "the Kumango martial arts tradition will perish." He told tiny Gusmiati, "focusing your attention or concentration is very important in martial arts. It is as if you are driving a car." Even though she was too young to understand what a driver was, he continued. "When you drive a car, your focus is to the road in front of you. But you must be aware of whatever occurs on your left and right side, even behind you, through the mirror. So it goes in practicing martial arts: focus your attention on the person in front of you—your partner or your enemy; at the same time, remain well aware of what is happening all around you."

A very strict and demanding teacher, Wahid Sampono Alam would punish little Gusmiati when she didn't take practicing seriously by making her stand in the house pond for hours. Or he would assign her a special task, such as taking care of the green frogs—of which she was terribly scared. Gusmiati had to face punishments such as these when she didn't fulfill her uncle's expectations. One day, Gusmiati visited a neighboring family's house. When she returned, her uncle asked her how many trees she saw on the way home. Unable to respond precisely, she knew what to do: immerse herself in the family pond. Wahid Sampono Alam had implanted in Gusmiati the essence of Minang traditional life values as reflected in the most famous Minang aphorism, "*alam takambang jadi guru*," a saying that, as intimated above, implies that a Minang must always observe carefully the workings of nature (the universe, one's surroundings) and take them as one's teacher or guru.

But *adat* does not operate alone in a Minang's life, because *adat* is based on *syarak* (Islamic laws), and Islamic laws are based on the Books of God, i.e., the Koran and the Hadith. So, as a child, like many other girls in her village, Gusmiati regularly went to the village *surau* to study the Koran, to pray, and to deepen her understanding of Islamic laws and teachings.

Gusmiati later summarized the essence of what she had learned from her uncle: "One must be very careful in one's life, always pray to Allah, to ask only His help in times of difficulties. One must discipline oneself and have self-confidence." Maintaining a strong will, and working with self-discipline, focused attention, intensity, and patience were other qualities Gusmiati learned from her early training in martial arts, which she faithfully practiced until her death in 2001. For all of her life, *Adat* and *syarak* were always with her.

## School Years and Early Career

Traditional Minangkabau “dance” can be grouped into three categories, determined by where it is practiced. First, martial arts-derived dances that emerge from the *sasaran*; second, dances that contain *dakwah* (Islamic teachings) practiced in the *surau* and *mesjid* (village prayer-house); third, Melayu dances practiced mostly by girls in public schools as part of their curricular or extracurricular activities. The first two movement forms are mostly practiced in inland Minangkabau *darek* (villages) while the last is practiced in larger coastal cities.

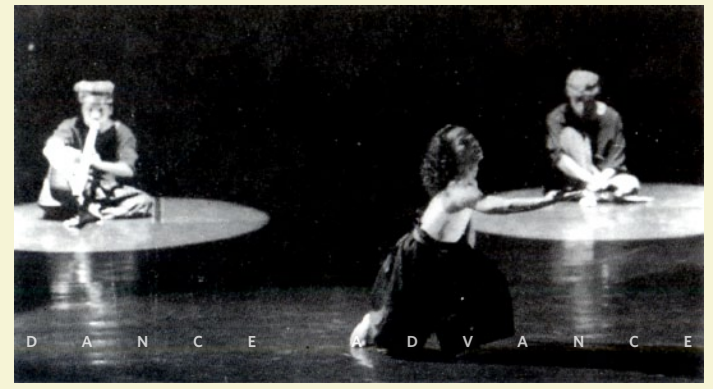
At the age of nine, Gusmiati moved with her family to Padangpanjang, a neighboring city known as the center of culture of inland West Sumatra. It was in Padangpanjang as a young schoolgirl that Gusmiati began to study Melayu dances under the guidance of Sofyan Naan, a local master. To her surprise studying Melayu dance outraged her uncle Sampono Alam. What she didn’t understand was that in the 1950s some Muslims in Minangkabau still believed that by studying and performing dance—showing the beauty of bodily movement in public—women put themselves into a morally unstable position. These

Muslims believed that dance made women more likely to behave sinfully. After several sometimes angry warnings, Sampono Alam chased his niece with a sword, and Gusmiati had to run as fast as she could to save her life. Only with great patience, and after gradual, repeated, and long explanations, was Gusmiati able to persuade her uncle that dancing would never damage her reputation as a Muslim woman. This was an honest promise, a vow that Gusmiati fulfilled up to the end of her life.

Upon entering junior high school, Gusmiati had become not only a good dancer but also an astute observer of traditional performing arts. Every year in Padangpanjang there was a nighttime fair in which various traditional Minangkabauan performing arts were performed, such as *pencak-silat*, *randai* (a kind of dance drama), or the *rabab* (a two-stringed Minang cello or, more generally, any musical instrument accompanying traditional Minang song). Gusmiati never missed these performances.

In 1957, after completing junior high, Gusmiati continued her studies at the SPG Vocational High School for Teachers. It was during this time that Gusmiati met Ms. Huriyah Adam (1936-71), the pioneering dancer who would become her teacher and inspire her life. She was the daughter of Syekh Adam Balai-Balai, a respected, forward-thinking Islamic leader in Padangpanjang who established the Madrasah Irsyadin Nas (MIN), his own Western-oriented public school for local young women.

At MIN, Syekh Adam trained his students to become good Islamic women and taught them about Western performing arts. (Adam’s sons also learned to play various Western musical instruments.) His daughter, the young Huriyah Adam, not only learned to play the violin well but also attained skill in the techniques of Western painting. More importantly, she was an excellent dancer and a creative dance teacher who was also a practicing musician (a violinist) and a visual artist. Huriyah performed various Melayu dances as well as traditional martial arts-based dances, such as the Sewah, Sijundai, Alang Bentan, Adau-adau, Padang, Piriang, Sibadindin, and the Galombang, that she learned from local village masters. Most important of all, Huriyah created new work based on traditional martial-arts movements she learned from local village masters.<sup>5</sup> In emulation of her colleague, perhaps, Gusmiati throughout her life immersed herself in bringing together dance and martial arts to create new and meaningful work.



Upon completing her course of study at SPG in Padangpanjang in 1960, Gusmiati enrolled at FKIP Teacher's College in Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province. She was majoring in Indonesian, yet in her spare time conducted intensive surveys of various traditional Minangkabau dances in the villages. After graduating in 1964, Gusmiati followed her parents to the city of Payakumbuh (also in West Sumatra) and taught at a junior high school there. Later, she founded her first amateur dance group for students, for which she choreographed short entertaining dances inspired by nature and the activities in her surroundings. These are, among others, *Tari Payung (Umbrella Dance)*, *Kasawah (Work at Rice Fields)*, *Layang-layang (Kites)*, *Panen (Harvest)*, and *Cewang di Langik (Clouds in the Sky)*.

In 1967, Gusmiati moved back to Batusangkar to teach at another junior high school, and continued to choreograph short dances. From 1972 to 1975, she studied at ASKI, the Indonesian (State) College of Traditional Performing Arts in Padangpanjang. After finishing her study, she served as a part-time dance teacher for a few years. Meanwhile, she also taught dance at a high school in Batusangkar and at a private dance studio in Padang, which in 1977 became the Indo Jati dance group. In that year Gusmiati choreographed *Rantak* (the title denotes a heavy or energetic step and also alludes to a larger social meaning: a strong will or intention that must be realized), a work that marked a significant development in her dance career.<sup>6</sup> As a member of the adjudicator board of the National Folk Dance Festival in Jakarta, I saw *Rantak* in 1978, when it was performed at the Festival. The following year I invited Gusmiati to participate in the Young Choreographers Festival II/1979, organized by the Jakarta Arts Council in Jakarta, for which she choreographed *Puti Galang Banyak* (literally, "the lady who wears many bracelets," alluding to a traditional Minang fable of a wealthy but arrogant and wicked woman). From 1979-81 she served as a dance instructor at the Jakarta-based Bunda Foundation dance group headed by Mrs. Nelly Adam Malik, wife of Adam Malik, the Vice President of Indonesia (1978-83), a native Minang who came to political prominence during Suharto's early years. In 1982, however, Gusmiati decided to return to Batusangkar, where she established the *Gumarang Sakti* dance company.

Gusmiati Suid, her company, and the arts of West Sumatra leaped into my mind in 1983, when I was invited to participate in an international dance and theater festival in Calcutta, India, organized by *Padatik*, a cultural organization in Calcutta that actively organizes traditional Indian dance and theatre training, and directed by Syahmanand Jalan. (As part of his plan to organize another international festival in dance, theater, and martial arts, Syahmanand had asked me to suggest artists to represent Indonesia in the event.) Back in Jakarta, I discussed this idea with Gusmiati Suid who was very enthusiastic and suggested ways to realize the dream of performing at this festival. I solicited advice from Leon Agusta, an outstanding writer of Minangkabau origin who at that time was a member of the Jakarta Arts Council, who offered me names of other contacts in theater, martial arts, and funding. Leon then contacted Chairul Harun, a well-known Minangkabau writer who had a good relationship with the West Sumatranese governor, and Bagindo Fahmi in Padang, West Sumatra, a local intellectual respected by traditional and modern performing artists in West Sumatra. Before leaving for New York to continue my own study in the performing arts, I managed to pass along the significant contact information to Syahmanand Jalan in Calcutta, as well as give him some advice as to how to proceed. Meanwhile, the Jakarta Institute of the Arts invited Gusmiati to be a guest dance instructor for the school year 1984-85.

Indeed, since her participation in the Young Choreographers Festival II/1979, Gusmiati had been busy, dividing her creative life between Batusangkar and Jakarta. She enjoyed the artistic life of a metropolis that was open to new creative work. Her work was staged in respected artistic venues and heatedly debated among artists and critics, an atmosphere she could hardly find in Batusangkar or even Padang, West Sumatra. She was introduced to a world in which a dance was considered to be a work of art, not just entertainment or promotion. She felt that her position as a civil servant in Batusangkar limited her creative freedom, so in 1985 she resigned her position as a junior high school teacher to dedicate her life to dance in Jakarta (and beyond).

Suwita Yanti and Yessy Apriati, Gusmiati's two daughters, had always danced with their mother's dance group. By contrast, Yandi Yasin, her only son (who later called himself Boi G. Sakti), hardly paid attention to his mother's dancing. Yet upon finishing high school in 1986, he surprised his mother by enrolling as a dance student at the Jakarta Institute of the Arts. The whole Gusmiati family thus migrated to Jakarta. Azwar Anas, the governor of West Sumatra, urged Gusmiati Suid to reconsider her choice. But for Gusmiati, the decision was final. "I need a better atmosphere for my creative growth and dance professionalism. I need friends who are critical and can feed my ambition to be a serious artist. Staying in West Sumatra means that I would only choreograph and perform for official celebrations and parties to welcome and entertain state guests. Only Jakarta can give me all that I need."

## Jakarta Years and Gumarang Sakti

So, as a single parent, Gusmiati Suid sold all her property in Batusangkar in 1987 and migrated with her three children to Jakarta. Many people in Indonesia want to move to Jakarta to pursue better lives and professional careers, but life in Jakarta is tough and highly demanding. Luckily for Gusmiati, Syahmanand Jalan's long-planned event, the Asian Festival of Theatre and Martial Arts, finally occurred in 1987, and Leon Agusta managed to pull together a small group of performing artists from West Sumatra, which included Gusmiati Suid's choreography and the Gumarang Sakti dancers as part of the programming. Significant funding from West Sumatra's governor, Azwar Anas, made the festival possible. Gusmiati's performance in Calcutta, prepared during six months of traveling back and forth from Jakarta to West Sumatra, was well received by performing artists and scholars from different parts of the world who were invited to the event. This trip also marked the first performances for the newly reestablished Gumarang Sakti, and made a lasting impression on Gusmiati and her dancers.

The same year, Gumarang Sakti appeared in the Indonesian Festival of Choreography at Gedung Kesenian Jakarta. And, significant for the future of the company, Boi Sakti won the first prize in the choreography competition organized by the Jakarta Arts Council. Boi had become a close partner to his mother in her creative work, the training of her dancers, and the management of the company.

But the year 1988 was a real test for Gusmiati Suid and Gumarang Sakti. For the first two years, Gusmiati lived in a modest house in Kramat Pulo, Jakarta, which had no permanent rehearsal space. While she initiated construction of a house and dance studio in Depok, south of Jakarta, the facility was not yet completed so no serious performances could yet be scheduled. Gusmiati declined invitations to present short entertaining pieces for wedding parties, dignitaries, and tourists in hotels in Jakarta. She was determined to remain an idealist, and choreograph and perform serious artistic work.

Slowly, however, her luck changed. By the end of 1988, Gusmiati moved into her new house in Depok, and the following year Gumarang Sakti was invited by the late Carl Wolz in Hong Kong to participate in the International Festival of Dance Academies. Gumarang Sakti was the first Indonesian dance company featured in WDA-APC (then called the Asia-Pacific Dance Alliance [APDA]). Then in 1990, Gumarang Sakti was appointed by Farida Oetoyo, manager of Gedung Kesenian Jakarta (GKJ), to be a GKJ resident dance company, and it participated in *Recontres Internationales de la Danse* in Paris.

The following year marked another milestone for the company. Gusmiati Suid and Gumarang Sakti performed at the Joyce Theatre in New York, representing Indonesia in the Festival of Indonesia (KIAS) in the US, and on September 20 was awarded a "Bessie" (The New York Dance and Performance Award), "in recognition of the outstanding creative achievement ... for a revelatory assembly of dancers and musicians building an exhilarating contemporary art both within and beyond the hallowed traditions of a great classical culture in *Music and Dance of Sumatra: Aceh and Minangkabau*." <sup>7</sup>

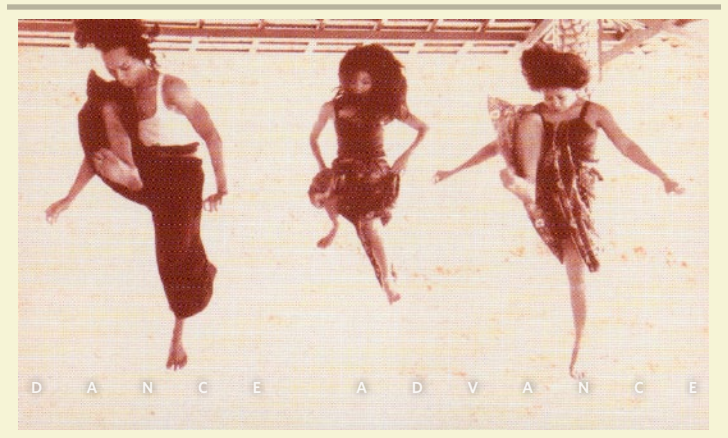
In 1992, Gusmiati Suid toured with Gumarang Sakti to Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, Canada; they were featured in the 2nd Jakarta International Festival of the Performing Arts; and the 14th Festival of Asian Arts in Hong Kong. In the following years Gumarang Sakti appeared in the 2nd Indonesian Dance Festival and in a week-long Celebration of Minang Culture in Jakarta. In 1994, Jochen Schmidt invited Gusmiati Suid and Gumarang Sakti to his International Dance Festival in Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany, to commemorate a century of German modern dance. In 1995 Gumarang Sakti performed in New Zealand; in 1996 the company toured to Chiangmay, Thailand; in 1997 it performed *Kabar Burung (Rumors)* and *Seruan (A Call for ...)* in the Singapore Festival of Asian Performing Arts; and in 1998 the company represented Indonesia in the 2nd Art Summit Indonesia in Jakarta with *Api Dalam Sekam (Fire in the Chaff)*, a commissioned work. The list goes on....

## Moving Forward with Tradition

In 1993, I reviewed Gusmiati's *Catuah Langkah (A Well-Plotted Move, 1992)* at Gedung Kesenian Jakarta for *Tempo* newsmagazine. Here's part of what I observed:

A female dancer in a long white shirt and loose batik trousers moves slowly, accompanied by Minang singing and the bamboo flute. A man in a similar white shirt and striped trousers appears from the right wing. Soon both chase each other and they briefly roll around together on the floor. Then each stands firmly on her/his left leg, bowing their bodies. All of a sudden, like a tiger, the man jumps high and lands quietly on the outside of his left thigh; he rolls his body fast toward the woman who stands still, calmly facing the danger. At the precisely calculated moment, she easily evades the attack, leaping effortlessly from her supporting leg. ... [Later], when the female dancer disappears upstage left, three other women enter. Now, the male dancer squats while the three women move in speedily, to the sound of *talempong* percussion. Silence reigns briefly before they move again quickly, accompanied by the sound of buffalo's bells.

*Catuah Langkah* ends with *Bakaba*, titled after a traditional Minang form of oral literature or storytelling in which one can find rich traditional teachings as well as entertainment. In her choreographic reconception of *bakaba*, Gusmiati shows a distinctly different approach from other Minang choreographers: she reinvents the essence of Minang tradition, not just the skin. Moving in clean, strong, sharp, and fast movements, her dancers wear simple black Chinese-cut cotton *galembong* trousers instead of the popular opulent, colorful, and flashy traditional Minang costumes. For Gusmiati, beauty is found in simplicity, not in material richness. These dances also marked a turning point in Gusmiati's artistic direction: she began to use energy, dancers, and sound efficiently. While she employed the movement and postural characteristics of Minang martial arts—changing positions at high speed, strong and sharp movements, as well as keeping the body still, ready to attack or evade—they were no longer performed hastily to the noisy sound of *talempong* and deafening big drums. In *Catuah Langkah* Gusmiati was more resourceful than she had been in the past in using bold, crisp movement and sound. With only five dancers, she filled the stage. This piece answered critics who accused Gusmiati of losing her choreographic style, or of blurring it with that of her son, who was fast becoming a rising star in Indonesian contemporary dance.





To me, Gusmiati's later choreography became more varied; in it, her dancers began to feel more at home in moving slowly and elegantly. In *Catuah Langkah*, Gusmiati allowed her dancers to walk casually on stage, left hands on their backs and nodding their heads. But seeing this (in her farewell performance prior to her US trip to the Festival of Indonesia in 1991) outraged some Minang elders and elite in Jakarta. They denounced Gusmiati's new choreography as too plain, simple, and even wretched because of the simple costuming (described above). Yet after Gusmiati returned to Indonesia with the Bessie Award, those who were initially dismissive changed their public opinion of Gusmiati's work.

In my opinion, *Bakaba* was able to blend various traditional Minang arts well: dance, music, martial arts, drama, comedy, and folktales. The result was more than a collage, but a meaningful performance that was pleasurable to listen to and to look at, and one that invited close interaction between performers and audiences. In *Bakaba*, the stage wings and backdrops were pulled up to reveal the back wall and work lights, as well as the makeup tables on each side. Opening up dimensions of time and space, this reconfiguration allowed the audience to interpret and imagine the place of the performance: a traditional Minang *rumah gadang* (grand/large house), a modern Minang mansion, a luxurious Minang restaurant, or, simply, what it was—an opened theatrical stage on which dancers and musicians form fascinatingly varied groupings and divisions of space.



Significantly, Gusmiati at the beginning of *Bakaba* also staged action in areas of the auditorium. This recalls to me the experience of watching a *randai* performance at a crossroad in a traditional Minang village, squeezed in among hundreds of spectators of different genders and ages—men and women, young and old—who spontaneously form a circle in which the performers perform, tell stories, and entertain. As an audience, we were free to comment, criticize, laugh, and give support to our favorite performer. No distance stood between audience and performer.

## Conclusion

While Gusmiati had moved to Jakarta, she retained her commitment to the traditions and life values of the Minang. She became modern without forgetting the traditional Minang values of *adat*, *syarak*, and *alam takambang jadi guru*, which consistently oriented her work. These values were reflected not only through the choreographer's use of martial arts-based dance movements and reinterpreted Minang music, but also in the themes and messages of her works. She once told a reporter, "Nature teaches me to explore and absorb every space of nature possible. We have to keep communicating with the era and the environment. This process is ongoing and cannot be stopped."<sup>8</sup> For Gusmiati, a compelling dance piece must have a message that can enrich viewers' lives, or make people question or think.

In *Kabar Burung* (Rumours, 1997), Gusmiati was inspired by *tupai janjang* (a form of *bakaba* in which an actor plays multiple roles): while performing as a character taken from a legend or folklore, the actor creatively augments his message with criticism of contemporary social ills. "The [storyteller] in *Kabar Burung* is looking for [his] lost conscience and later finds it locked in a museum. *Kabar Burung* is the subtle warning from Gusmiati Suid of the uncertain situation of Indonesia at that time, especially the loss of many people's consciences" <sup>9</sup>

In *Seruan* (A Call), similarly, Gusmiati reminded those who are forgetful of Islamic teachings to return to their consciences. She had told me, "One should ask some help from Allah, God, so that one is not trapped in wrongdoing, sin, and corruption." And in *Api Dalam Sekam* (Fire in the Chaff, 1998), Gusmiati explored the dire possibilities for Indonesia's future as a result of its people's actions. The great danger ("the fire") is in front of us all ("in the chaff"). Any time the wind blows, it can ignite explosions, burning down our harmonious life as a multiethnic nation.

Moving forward with tradition was almost an obsession for Gusmiati Suid. By adapting Minang tradition to the form of contemporary dance, and presenting it in various global venues, Gusmiati did much to bring Gumarang Sakti to international prominence. But she has gone forever, leaving Gumarang Sakti to the hands of her only son, the choreographer Boi G. Sakti. Boi Sakti inherits many of his mother's creative skills and values, but has not merely replicated her, as Minarti comments on Boi Sakti's recent work, *Ritus-Ritus Kesucian* (Sacred Rites, 2001). "[Boi's] movement at a glance reflects modern dance, which is free and expressive. ... Yet, the spirit remains that of Minang." <sup>10</sup> In Boi Sakti's words, "In looking for movement, the early awareness does not always come from tradition, though at the end the 'spirit' that wraps it is a Minang one." <sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he says, "Tradition does not always 'emerge' in my work. It will carry on by its own." <sup>12</sup> Under the direction of Boi Sakti, Gumarang Sakti will enter another era and aesthetic approach, but its new values will be as important as the old. After seeing Boi Sakti's work *Di Jalan Tua* (On the Old Road) performed at the Art Summit Indonesia 2001, Klaus Witzeling wrote that Indonesia "could...be on the way to maintaining the rich tradition and deep roots of dance in everyday life, while remaining open to contemporary movements. ... Boi G. Sakti is a paradigmatic example of such promise." <sup>13</sup>

I'd like to end by quoting Detlef Gericke-Schönhagen, a former program officer of the Goethe Institut in Jakarta who conducted a series of encounters in 1997 between Gusmiati Suid and Gumarang Sakti's dancers and German choreographer Joachim Schlommer and his dancers. Through this collaborative four-week workshop entitled "Face to Face," Gusmiati was able to formulate beautifully and expressively her feeling and hope through her choreography in *Asa di Ujung Tanduk* (Hope on the Tip of A Buffalo's Horn, 1997). In her program notes, she writes:

The fears in a desperate situation wash us away  
For we are afraid of uncertainty  
Nonetheless, hopes live  
For life without hope is like dead before death

A year after Gusmiati passed away, Schönhagen recalls the choreographer, and writes about his hope:

I was so lucky to be able to spend time with Ibu [Gusmiati Suid] before her death last year [2001]. She spoke in a soft but intense voice, sprinkled with light humor. Whenever Ibu entered a room, her presence was quickly acknowledged. She had what people call an *aura*. Her stature was of an artist who was very productive, bold, and solid—characteristics that are highly respected in Germany and indicative of a person who is usually trusted to fill theatres on their own merits or whose works tour throughout the world. Any country would have been blessed to have a talent like hers. Not so many people have it, and these rare talents must be supported and developed.

Boi G. Sakti obviously inherited his mother's great talent and I hope he will get the same support as has been granted to mother and son choreographers Birgit Cullberg and Mats Eck in Sweden. They built a dynasty of prominent choreographers who propelled Sweden and its small population to the center of world-class dance where Indonesia has belonged for quite some time. <sup>14</sup>

"Amen," I say. Gusmiati Suid has left for good. Gumarang Sakti, I hope, continues moving forward.

Taipei, 14 April 2004

## Biography of Sal Murgiyanto

Sal Murgiyanto is a lecturer at the Jakarta Institute of the Arts, and visiting lecturer in the graduate programs of Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, and the STSI Indonesian College of the Arts, Solo, Central Java, Indonesia. He is Chair of the Indonesian Chapter of the World Dance Alliance-Asia Pacific, and from 1992-2004 was the Founding Director of the Indonesian Dance Festival. Murgiyanto's recent publications include *Tradition and Innovation: Selected Dance Issues in Indonesia* (Wedatama Widya Sastra, 2004) and *Dance Criticism: Skills and Necessary Knowledge* (MSPI Society for the Indonesian Performing Arts, 2002). He has also written or co-authored *Traditional Indonesian Theatres* (1996), *When the Red light Fades Out: A Dance Criticism* (1993), as well as the articles "Tradition: A Source for Creation or Cultural Burden?" (2000), "The Melting of An Iceberg in Contemporary Dance in Indonesia" (1997), and "The Renewal of Dance out of the Rituals and Cults of Indonesia" (1996). In addition, he has contributed to the Indonesian Heritage Series, volume 8, of *Performing Arts* (Didier Millet, 1998). Murgiyanto studied dance at ASTI National Dance Academy of Indonesia in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and at the University of Colorado. He holds a Ph.D. in performance studies from New York University.

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## Footnotes

1. Presented at "Traces of Tradition," a panel discussion at the International Dance Conference, organized jointly by the Congress on Research in Dance, World Dance Alliance-Asia Pacific, and the International Center of Kinetography Laban, Taipei National University for the Arts, Taipei, 1-4 Aug. 2004.
2. This introduction is adapted from the article "Gusmiati Telah Pergi" ("Gusmiati Has Gone") that I wrote for the program notes of Gumarang Sakti's performances at the GoetheHaus, Jakarta, 20-21 May 2002 (previous to the company's June 2002 tour to Berlin and Copenhagen). Thanks to Helly Minarti who translated this article, originally written in Bahasa Indonesia, into English for the program notes.
3. Murgiyanto, *Gumarang Sakti Dance Company: Nature Should Be Taken as the Teacher*, pp. 75-7.
4. This discussion of Gusmiati's childhood is based on Desfina, "Gusmiati Suid: Koreografer Sumatra Barat di Era Globalisasi: Sebuah Biografi," pp. 32-49.
5. On the short but significant dance career of Huriyah Adam see "Huriyah Adam (1936-1971): Redefining Minangkabau Dance," chapter 4 of my dissertation, *Between Unity and Diversity: Four Indonesian Choreographers*, especially pp. 233-303.
6. Gusmiati choreographed *Rantak* to express the ambition and energy to work and accomplish lofty goals that women, like men, possess. The dance thus depicts Minangkabau women moving strongly and dynamically, as men do, in *silat* movement.
7. Award letter, New York Dance and Performance Award (the "Bessies").
8. Gusmiati Suid to Sapto Waluyo, *Gatra* 10 Oct. 1998, trans. Helly Minarti. Qtd. in "Baguru Ka Alam Takambang Bagi Orang Minang," p. 16.
9. Program notes, Gumarang Sakti performance, GoetheHaus, Jakarta, 20-21 May 2002, p. 21.
10. Gumarang Sakti program notes, 20-21 May 2002, p. 25.
11. Gumarang Sakti program notes, 20-21 May 2002, p. 25.
12. *Jakarta Post*, 21 April 2002, qtd. in Gumarang Sakti program notes, 20-21 May 2002, p. 25.
13. "Surat dari Jakarta: Lush Blossom in a Time of Drought," *Ballet International/Tanz Aktuell* 11 (November 2001), p. 52.
14. Gericke-Schonhagen, pp. 5-6.



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