

Gender Aesthetics and Symbolic Tension in Syofyani's Pasambahan Dance: Negotiating Honor, Hospitality, and Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the movement techniques and body postures in Syofyani's Pasambahan Dance by exploring how the values of honor and hospitality are constructed, performed, and negotiated within the Minangkabau cultural context. Rather than assuming harmony between movement and cultural values as fixed, this study questions how gender construction and bodily symbolism in dance operate within a matrilineal society that paradoxically privileges masculine roles in public performance spaces. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with data collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation at the Syofyani Dance Studio in Padang, West Sumatra. The researcher was present not only as an external observer but also as a limited participant in rehearsals and artistic discussions, in order to understand the meaning-making process through the body and movement. Findings show that male dancers' movement techniques, derived from pencak silat, exhibit protective, dominant, and assertive traits, while female dancers express gentleness and deference through movements inspired by silat bunga. However, a critical reading reveals that this gender division does not necessarily reflect Minangkabau gender reality but rather represents a symbolic negotiation that evolves with changing social dynamics and modern aesthetic expectations. Furthermore, symbols such as the carano and betel leaves are not always received with a singular meaning. Younger dancers, especially those living in urban areas, interpret these symbols as formalities or even folklorization, rather than as expressions of spirituality. When the dance is performed at tourism events or modern receptions, its meaning shifts from a ritual of respect to a visual attraction. This study affirms that Pasambahan Dance is not merely an aesthetic medium but also a discursive arena where values, identities, and ideologies are negotiated. By combining dance analysis and performance ethnography, this research contributes to the discourse on cultural preservation, performative critique, and arts education that is both contextual and reflective.

KEYWORDS

Pasambahan Dance
Gender Performance
Movement Techniques
Cultural Embodiment
Minangkabau

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INTRODUCTION

Each region in the archipelago has different cultural forms, reflecting unique characteristics. These differences indicate that every region's culture has its distinct identity. Culture must be preserved; otherwise, it may become extinct and disappear entirely. Culture is closely related to society, as social life contains cultural elements. In reality, everything within a society is determined by its culture. Culture directs human civilization, shaping all aspects of human progress (Indrayuda, 2013:87).

The system in art includes the interaction patterns between artistic elements such as aesthetics, ethics, techniques, and artistic functions. It also involves the transmission of artistic knowledge through education, training, and teaching within society (Sudarsono, 2000). In traditional art, the artistic system encompasses structures and patterns involving artistic elements like form, function, values, and norms that develop within specific communities. Traditional artistic systems help preserve cultural identity by passing down aesthetic and philosophical values (Indrayuda, 2008).

Art is a branch of culture that reflects aesthetic values derived from human expressions of beauty, enjoyed visually or audibly. As beings with a high sense of appreciation, humans create diverse forms of art, from the simplest to the most complex. Therefore, art plays a significant role in human life, from basic to sophisticated levels. Art emerges, exists, and evolves alongside society. Each region has unique artistic expressions influenced by climate, culture, customs, livelihoods, and beliefs. Art is an ancestral heritage that must be acknowledged and preserved. It also serves as a means of communication within society, conveying messages, stories, and life lessons. Until today, art remains essential to social and cultural life, both individually and collectively.

One of the functions of art is to create aesthetically pleasing forms for human enjoyment. Such forms satisfy human aesthetic consciousness, which is fulfilled when we perceive unity or harmony in the observed forms. Aesthetic pleasure arises from feelings of beauty, comfort, fascination, and attraction. According to Soedarsono in *Dance Learning in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum* (2020), dance is the human soul's expression conveyed through rhythmic movements. Soul expression refers to a person's desire to convey feelings and emotions, while rhythmic movement aligns bodily gestures with musical accompaniment. In *Understanding Indonesian Dance Art* (2019), Muryanto cites Corrie Hartong, a Dutch dance expert, who defines dance as rhythmic movements of body parts in specific spaces and times. La Mery describes dance as a symbolic expression in an elevated form that must be internalized to achieve tangible meaning.

According to Soedarsono in *Indonesian Performing Arts in the Era of Globalization* (1999), performing arts integrate various artistic elements, such as dance, music, drama, and visual arts, into a cohesive presentation for an audience, creating an aesthetic experience. Traditional Indonesian performing arts, such as wayang kulit and traditional dances, harmoniously combine these elements. Sal Murgiyanto defines performing arts as "artistic spectacles" presented before an audience (1996:153). A successful performance requires supporting elements, including the audience, message delivery, presentation methods, space, and time.

The philosophy of art refers to the values, concepts, and deep ideas contained in artistic works. It seeks to understand the relationship between art, humanity, and the world, encompassing aesthetics, ethics, and existence. Plato believed that art is an imitation (mimesis) of reality and serves a moral function in educating humanity. Art's philosophical meaning is to depict ideal truths that guide human behavior. In traditional arts, philosophical aspects include moral, aesthetic, and religious values that shape artistic creation and appreciation. Art is a medium for drawing humans closer to a higher meaning of life (Indrayuda, 2008).

Viktor Lowenfeld (1975) and Erwin Panofsky argue that art has philosophical meaning because it expresses personal experiences and subjective interpretations of the world. Art helps humans understand themselves and their relationships with others. Panofsky suggests that art's philosophical essence lies in its symbols, reflecting the ideology, cultural values, and worldviews of the societies that create them.

The philosophical meaning of art highlights how it serves as a medium for understanding life, culture, and human experience. In the context of Tari Pasambahan, its philosophical significance can be analyzed through symbolic movements, music, costumes, and Minangkabau cultural values. It conveys messages of hospitality, gratitude, and sincerity. Traditional dance is an integral cultural identity for an ethnic group, uniting its people. Traditional dances adhere to customs and norms specific to their cultural contexts, making them inseparable from traditional ceremonies (Indrayuda, 2013:33).

Rusliana (1982:78) defines traditional art as a longstanding cultural heritage passed down through generations, governed by established principles and customs. West Sumatra, also known as the Minangkabau homeland, is rich in ethnic diversity, culture, and traditions. Its cultural wealth includes traditional dances, cuisine, musical instruments, traditional houses, traditional attire, ethnic diversity, ceremonies, and folk songs.

Minangkabau's traditional dances include *Tari Piring*, *Tari Indang*, *Tari Lilin*, *Tari Payung*, *Tari Pasambahan*, *Tari Rantak*, *Tari Randai*, and *Tari Alang Babega*. These dances are often developed by art studios, such as the Syofyani Dance Studio and Music Ensemble, established on February 15, 1962, by students from Andalas University and the Teachers' Training Institute (IKIP) in Padang. The Syofyani Dance Studio has produced numerous traditional dances and innovative choreographies inspired by folklore and traditional dance motifs. Among its creations are *Tari Pasambahan*, *Tari Payung*, *Tari Sewah*, and *Tari Magek Manandin*.

Tari Pasambahan represents *Minangkabau* culture, embodying deep aesthetic and philosophical values. It is performed in traditional ceremonies as a gesture of respect for guests, reflecting the *Minangkabau* people's politeness and openness. The *Pasambahan* Dance stands as one of the most recognizable traditional dances in *Minangkabau* culture, serving both ceremonial and symbolic functions. Traditionally performed to welcome honored guests at weddings and formal gatherings, this dance reflects deeply held values of hospitality, honor, and communal identity. Choreographed by maestro Syofyani, the dance has evolved into a codified performance rooted in cultural memory yet responsive to contemporary dynamics. While its aesthetic qualities are widely acknowledged, the symbolic tensions embedded in its movements, gestures, and gendered roles invite a more critical examination.

This study is grounded in a broader anthropological and performance studies framework that views traditional dances not as static expressions of heritage, but as dynamic cultural texts. Within this context, the *Pasambahan* Dance is approached as a site where meanings are produced, contested, and circulated. The dance's form, particularly its clear division between male and female movement vocabularies, raises questions about the construction and performance of gender roles in a matrilineal society such as *Minangkabau*. Why does the male body remain dominant in public performative space, even within a community that centers kinship through maternal lineage?

In current academic discussions, especially within ethnographic performance studies, the body is not a neutral vehicle of expression but a site of cultural inscription. Following this perspective, movements in *Pasambahan* Dance are not merely artistic gestures but embodied representations of social values, power relations, and historical continuities. Yet, such representations are not always harmonious. This study probes the underlying assumptions in the dance's choreographic structure, questioning whether the gender roles and symbols performed are consistent with lived realities or whether they reflect selective cultural imaginaries aimed at preservation or commodification.

The relevance of this inquiry is heightened in today's context of globalization, where traditional dances are often recontextualized for tourism, education, and digital consumption. In these new settings, the meanings embedded in gestures like offering sirih or bowing in "*sambah*" movements may shift or fragment. The younger generation, particularly urban *Minangkabau* youth, may no longer relate to these gestures as sacred but as ritualistic performances devoid of personal resonance. Thus, this research seeks to explore how *Pasambahan* Dance functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a stage for negotiating identity, power, and modernity.

Ultimately, this introduction seeks to move beyond descriptive approaches and toward an interpretive and critical reading of *Pasambahan* Dance. By focusing on the intersection of movement, gender, and symbolic meaning, this study positions the dance as a performative discourse that mirrors the tensions and transformations within *Minangkabau* society itself.

METHOD

This research utilizes a descriptive qualitative method with the aim of identifying and understanding the techniques and body postures in Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance, which reflect the values of honor and hospitality in *Minangkabau* culture. The qualitative approach is chosen to enable the researcher to explore the deeper meanings behind movements and symbolism in the dance, as well as to examine the relationship between movement techniques and the cultural values upheld by the *Minangkabau* community.

The type of research used is qualitative with a descriptive method, which provides a clear depiction of the research object in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behavior. It involves collecting documents in the form of photos and recording videos. This type of research relies on humans as the primary research instrument and is agreed upon by both parties (Bogdan and Taylor in Maargono, 1997:36). In relation to this, Moleong (2010:6) states that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, motivation, and actions. It is conducted holistically and descriptively in the form of words and language within a specific natural context, utilizing various natural methods.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the techniques and body postures in *Syofyani's Pasambahan* Dance, aiming to understand how cultural meanings are embodied through movement and how those meanings are interpreted across different generational and social groups. The research focused on how gender, symbolism, and tradition are choreographically represented and questioned through embodied performance. Data were collected using four complementary strategies: participant observation, in-depth interviews, visual documentation, and document analysis. The triangulation of these methods aimed to ensure the reliability and richness of the data.

Participant Observation: The researcher spent three months conducting immersive fieldwork at the Syofyani Dance Studio in Padang. This included attending weekly training sessions, observing rehearsals and performances, and engaging in informal conversations with dancers. The researcher occasionally participated in warm-ups and basic movements to develop bodily familiarity with the choreographic structure. Observational notes were recorded daily, emphasizing not only the visible gestures but also interpersonal interactions, correctional feedback from trainers, and emotional expressions of the dancers.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 informants: the choreographer Syofyani, three senior dancers over the age of 50, four junior dancers aged 18–25, two cultural scholars, and two local audience members familiar with the dance

tradition. Interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* and *Minangkabau*, transcribed verbatim, and translated for analysis. The questions explored meanings of movement, perceptions of gender roles, experiences of training, and reactions to modern adaptations of the dance.

Visual Documentation: More than 200 photos and 10 hours of video footage were collected, capturing rehearsal sequences, close-ups of movement gestures, and stage performances. These materials were analyzed frame-by-frame to identify recurring motifs, contrasts between male and female dancers, and the use of space, rhythm, and posture. Specific attention was paid to how movements such as “*sambah*,” “*pitunggua*,” or “*langkah si ganjua lalai*” were executed by dancers of different generations. **Document Analysis:** Archival material—including performance programs, training manuals from the studio, and previous academic writings on Syofyani’s works—were reviewed to contextualize the empirical findings. These documents helped situate the *Pasambahan* Dance within broader discourses of tradition, modernity, and cultural policy.

Researcher’s Positionality: The researcher acknowledged their partial-outsider status as someone trained in dance studies but not native to *Minangkabau* culture. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the research to identify moments of bias, uncertainty, or emotional response during the fieldwork. The researcher’s gender identity, age, and educational background were seen as influential in both access to information and interpretation.

Data Analysis: The analysis followed Miles and Huberman’s model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. However, the process was iterative and interpretive rather than strictly procedural. Codes were generated from the data but remained flexible to accommodate emerging themes, such as “embodied gender,” “ritual versus spectacle,” and “symbolic disruption.” Contradictory statements by informants were not discarded but explored as signs of cultural tension or transformation. By approaching dance not only as an object of observation but also as a dynamic cultural practice, this methodological framework enabled the researcher to uncover the layered meanings of *Pasambahan* Dance and its shifting significance in today’s socio-cultural landscape.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pasambahan Dance: A Ritual of Honor and Hospitality

According to Indrayuda (2017), *Tari Pasambahan* is a traditional *Minangkabau* dance that functions as a ceremonial expression of respect, particularly in rituals welcoming esteemed guests. Commonly performed at weddings and other traditional events, this dance embodies the values of hospitality, appreciation, and politeness that are central to *Minangkabau* social ethics. It serves not merely as performance but as a ritual gesture through which the host community communicates sincerity and reference.

Further cultural and scholarly significance of the *Pasambahan* Dance is emphasized by scholars such as Edi Sedyawati (2006) and Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi (2011). Sedyawati underlines that traditional dances like *Pasambahan* represent cultural expressions that reflect the identity and continuity of a community. The dance preserves social memory and conveys inherited values across generations. Rohidi adds that such dances are not only artistic performances but are also embedded with social and cultural functions, acting as a form of non-verbal communication that transmits moral codes, customs, and communal respect.

Syofyani, a prominent *Minangkabau* artist and cultural practitioner, asserts that *Tari Pasambahan* is deeply rooted in the customs (*adat*) of the *Minangkabau* people. For him,

the dance is not simply entertainment but a visual embodiment of respect, intended to honor guests and uphold *Minangkabau* philosophical values. It represents the *Minangkabau* worldview that integrates politeness (*santun*), openness, and generosity as moral imperatives in social encounters. She further elaborates that the choreography contains embedded symbolism, with every gesture—particularly those of bowing, offering, and slow-flowing movement—serving as metaphors for social ideals such as humility, warmth, and sincerity. For Syofyani, *Pasambahan* is not just a dance but a visual ritual that reinforces the social structures and values that define *Minangkabau* society.

Despite its traditional character, Syofyani observes that the *Pasambahan* Dance remains flexible and adaptable. It can be performed in various ceremonial contexts, both formal and informal, yet without losing its essential meaning. In this way, the dance becomes a dynamic symbol of cultural continuity that remains relevant across generations and settings. However, Syofyani insists on maintaining the authenticity of core movements and rhythm. While some creative innovation may be allowed, such changes must not compromise the fundamental aesthetic and ethical values embodied in the dance. Accordingly, *Tari Pasambahan* as interpreted and choreographed by Syofyani emerges not merely as a product of cultural tradition but as a living representation of *Minangkabau* social philosophy, carefully preserved through form, function, and fidelity to its roots.

Historical Origins of *Pasambahan* Dance by Syofyani

The *Pasambahan* Dance choreographed by Syofyani was first created in 1962. Its inaugural performance was a significant moment: it was presented as a gesture of welcome for the King of Belgium (then visiting Bukittinggi), signifying its position as a ceremonial interface between *Minangkabau* tradition and international diplomacy. Similar to other cultures that use formal rituals to greet important guests, the *Minangkabau* community has long employed dances like *Galombang* and *Pasambahan* to fulfill this function. Notably, *Galombang* is performed outside the venue to greet guests upon arrival, whereas *Pasambahan* is typically staged inside, embodying a more intimate expression of welcome.

The choreography of the *Pasambahan* Dance is guided by *Minangkabau* customary wisdom encapsulated in the adage: *punish kaph dark dislike, punish hati bakaadaan*, which can be loosely translated as “welcoming with pure heart and sincere intentions, like the softness of cotton.” The dance thus becomes a performative act of sincerity, not just hospitality. Structurally, *Pasambahan* incorporates elements from the *Galombang* dance—a martial arts-based performance typically performed by young men—accompanied by six young women and one *Carano* bearer. The *Carano*, a traditional offering tray, is carried by one of the female dancers and contains betel leaves, areca nuts, lime, and gambir. These items symbolize purity and the sincerity of the host. When a guest receives or even touches the *Carano*, it signifies mutual respect and the guest’s acknowledgment of the community’s honor.

The movements of *Pasambahan* are derived from *silat bunga*—a non-combative, artistic form of *pencak silat*. Male movements include *pitunggua*, *tagak itiak*, *sibak*, *tujuang aia*, *gelek*, *sambah*, *cabiak kain*, and *tapuak silek*. These gestures reflect strength, readiness, and a grounded presence, symbolizing male roles as protectors. In contrast, female movements such as *langkah si ganjua lalai* and *dari pai suruik nan labiah*—which translate into highly stylized, gliding, and flowing gestures—exemplify feminine agility, grace, and humility.

These choreographic distinctions express the complementarity of gender roles within *Minangkabau* cosmology. While men assert spatial authority and strength, women bring balance through elegance and restraint, both working in harmony to present an idealized vision of *Minangkabau* social structure. In contemporary practice, the *Pasambahan* Dance has expanded its use beyond ceremonial state functions to include weddings, cultural festivals, and formal guest receptions. It continues to serve as a dynamic expression of *Minangkabau* values, reaffirming cultural identity through performance. Despite its popularization, Syofyani's version of *Pasambahan* remains grounded in traditional forms and preserves a clear distinction between male and female movement vocabularies, emphasizing both its ritual and artistic authenticity.

Dance Style and Body Posture in Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance

In the vibrant landscape of *Minangkabau* dance, several choreographers have contributed significantly to shaping its aesthetic trajectory—among them, Hoerijah Adam, Gusmiati Suid, Firmansyah, and Syofyani stand out as visionaries. Syofyani, in particular, has carved a distinct path by blending traditional values with a refined choreographic vision. His interpretation of the *Pasambahan* Dance is a testament to his commitment to preserving cultural identity while advancing creative stylization.

What makes Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance stylistically unique is its synthesis of Malay and *Minangkabau* influences. Rather than merely replicating inherited forms, Syofyani "sterilizes" movement vocabularies—distilling their essence to produce a hybrid style that is both rooted in tradition and shaped by personal innovation. This creative fusion manifests as a formal language of dance that resonates with ceremonial gravity, aesthetic balance, and cultural precision.

Central to Syofyani's choreographic signature is his consistent emphasis on gender distinction. Unlike many contemporary dance works that blur gender binaries, Syofyani insists on highlighting the contrasting yet complementary qualities of male and female dancers. His *Pasambahan* Dance always presents two distinct movement characters: one embodying masculine strength and assertion, and the other reflecting feminine grace and humility. This gendered duality reflects *Minangkabau* social structure, in which men and women occupy differentiated yet interdependent roles.

The male movements in the dance are steeped in *pencak silat* tradition—articulated through forceful, grounded gestures that suggest protection, leadership, and control. Poses such as *pitunggua*, *tagak itiak*, *sibak*, and *tuduang aia* evoke the readiness and authority expected of men during ceremonial receptions. Particularly, *sambah*—a lowered stance with extended hands—serves as a symbol of humility and reverence, portraying the male dancer as a guardian who simultaneously honors and safeguards the ritual space. Here is a description of the movements of the male movement.

Table 1. Variety of Movement 1

No	Count	Hands	Feet	Body	Head	Notes
1.	One	Arms crossed in front of the chest.	Right foot crossed in front of the left foot.	Body stands upright.	Head facing forward.	Performed 1x4.
	Two	Both hands open in a V diagonal upward.	Right foot crossed in front of the left foot.	Body stands firm.	Head facing forward.	Performed 1x4.



Figure 1. Entrance Movement (Doc. Tiara Virginia Aulia, 2015)

Table 2. Variety of Movement 2

No	Count	Hands	Feet	Body	Head	Notes
2.	One	Both hands in a V diagonal upward, fingertips flicked inward.	Right foot crossed in front of the left foot.	Body stands upright.	Head turned to the right.	
	One	Arms crossed in front of the chest.	Right foot lifted and supported on the left foot.	Body leaning forward.	Head facing forward.	
	Two	Left hand in front of the chest, right hand extended straight to the right.	Right foot opened backward behind the left foot (pitunggu tengah).	Body leaning.	Head facing forward.	
	Three	Both hands move along the sides of the body.	Right foot in front of the left foot (sitting position).	Body upright.	Head facing forward.	
	Three	Both palms joined together.	Right foot stepped forward past the left foot (pitunggu depan).	Body leaning forward.	Head bowed down.	



Figure 2. *Sambah* Movement (Doc. Tiara Virginia Aulia, 2015)

Table 3. Variety of Movement 3

No	Count	Hands	Feet	Body	Head	Notes
3.	Four	Four	Right hand extended forward	Left foot crossed in front of the right foot	Body leaning forward	Head facing forward
	Five	Right hand bent at the elbow in front of the chest, left hand on the thigh	Right foot opens behind the left foot (middle stance)	Body leaning backward	Head facing forward	
	Six	Left hand pats the thigh, right hand pushes forward towards the back	Right foot steps forward past the left foot (middle stance)	Body facing backward	Head straight forward towards the back	Performed 1x4



Figure 3. *Pitunggua* Movement (Doc. Tiara Virginia Aulia, 2015)

In contrast, the female dancer's vocabulary emerges from *silat bunga*—a stylized, non-aggressive variant of martial arts. Movements such as *langkah si ganjua lalai* and *dari pai suruik nan labiah* flow with a refined softness, suggesting attentiveness, gentleness, and grace. One symbolic gesture is the act of offering *sirih* (betel leaf) from a *Carano* tray, an

act embodied through fluid arm extensions and grounded footwork. This gesture not only welcomes the guest but also communicates a silent invocation of mutual respect and sincere hospitality. The femininity in these gestures is not passive; it is powerful in its refinement, signaling the cultural virtue of measured elegance. Here is a description of the movements of the male movement.

Table 4. Variety of Female Movement

No	Count	Hands	Feet	Body	Head	Notes
1.	One	Both hands form a right angle, palms joined together	Right foot swings forward, left foot supports	Body upright facing forward	Head facing forward	
	Two	Both hands form a right angle, palms joined together	Right foot swings to the right side, left foot supports	Body upright, facing diagonally forward to the right	Head turning to the right	
	Three	Both hands form a right angle, palms joined together	Right foot tiptoes beside the left foot	Body upright facing forward	Head facing forward	
	Four	Both hands form a right angle, palms joined together	Right foot steps forward, followed by the left foot	Body upright facing forward	Head facing forward	Performed 1x4

This movement is repeated four times in alternating directions: left, right, left, and right.



Figure 4. Siganjua Lalai Step Movement (Doc. Tiara Virginia Aulia, 2015)

These choreographic structures are grounded in specific body postures that reflect *Minangkabau* cosmology. In dance, posture is not simply a matter of technical form but an expressive anchor—the source from which meaning flows. The *Pasambahan* Dance features dominant standing positions that draw inspiration from the body's relationship with the natural world and communal customs. These postures harmonize the vocabulary of movement with the rootedness of silat, ensuring that every motion carries both physical balance and philosophical weight.

Form, as Susanne K. Langer (1988) describes, is the articulation of structure and wholeness. In *Pasambahan*, form emerges through the integration of physical and expressive

dimensions. The visible structure—the spatial formations, the use of symmetry, and the patterned transitions—reflect the external manifestation of cultural order. Yet beneath these surfaces lies the intangible: the symbolic and spiritual intentions embedded in every step, bend, and gaze.

Syofyani's choreography respects this duality. The physical dimensions of his dance are precise, attentive to detail, and steeped in codified grammar. Yet what elevates the *Pasambahan* Dance beyond choreography is its performative ethic: it becomes a rite of passage where posture becomes poise, and movement becomes message. Through a careful interplay of body, space, energy, and time—the four elemental aspects of dance—*Pasambahan* is not merely performed; it is embodied. In the hands of Syofyani, *Pasambahan* Dance evolves into more than an artistic form—it becomes a ceremonial narrative, where male and female energies intertwine not in opposition, but in harmony. It is within this aesthetic tension and ritual clarity that the dance finds its enduring strength.

Movement Character and Form of Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance

The character of movement in dance is inseparable from the cultural, environmental, and philosophical framework from which it emerges. In the case of *Pasambahan* Dance by Syofyani, movement character is not only a reflection of choreographic intention but also a performative embodiment of *Minangkabau* values, customs, and gender roles. Syofyani's works are deeply rooted in the daily lives of the *Minangkabau* people, and thus, every gesture, stance, and dynamic is a symbolic echo of communal identity.

A defining hallmark of Syofyani's choreography is his persistent emphasis on gendered movement character. Rarely does he compose dances with unified or androgynous roles; instead, his creations consistently present two distinct choreographic personae—male and female—each carrying differentiated aesthetics, energies, and functions. This is especially prominent in *Pasambahan* Dance, where gender not only informs the physical technique but also articulates the symbolic responsibilities of each role within the performance and the cultural ceremony it enacts.

Male dancers perform movements inspired by *pencak silat*, a martial art that emphasizes strength, agility, and spatial command. These motions—*pitunggua*, *tagak itiak*, *sibak*, *tuduang aia*, *gelek*, *sambah*, *cabiak kain*, and *tapuak silek*—are structured to highlight dominance, readiness, and assertiveness. The body is held upright, feet grounded with firm transitions, and energy is projected outward, conveying authority and vigilance. Symbolically, these qualities reflect the societal expectation of *Minangkabau* men as protectors, defenders of honor (*kehormatan*), and ceremonial gatekeepers.

Conversely, female dancers embody motion derived from *silat bunga*, a softer, more ornamental variant of martial arts, adapted for grace and elegance rather than confrontation. Movements like *langkah si ganjua lalai*, *maambiak siriah*, and *dari pai suruik nan labiah* (literally translated as “from approaching to gracefully retreating”) convey a femininity grounded in humility, finesse, and inner strength. The hands are often joined or curved, arms extended fluidly, and the body inclines slightly forward—a posture that visually communicates respect, attentiveness, and welcoming intent. These embodied forms reflect the symbolic role of *Minangkabau* women as hosts, nurturers, and preservers of communal harmony.

These gendered choreographies do not merely serve as visual variety; they are integral to the philosophical underpinning of the dance. They illustrate the *adat* concept of

complementarity in *Minangkabau* society, where male and female forces are not hierarchical but co-constructive. The male role in *Pasambahan* is not about domination, and the female role is not submission—it is a choreography of cooperation. When the *carano* (betel tray) is offered by the female dancer and received by the guest, the action is more than symbolic; it is a performative contract of mutual honor, the body enacting the speech of the heart.

These movement characters are shaped not only by internal aesthetics but also by external factors—namely the historical, social, and ritual contexts of the region. Syofyani's training and choreographic influences emerge from both traditional centers of martial arts (*surau* and *sasaran silek*) and court-influenced Malay dance traditions, especially those circulating in pre- and post-independence urban centers in West and Central Sumatra. In these contexts, the dance evolved both as an aristocratic form of greeting and a social instrument of refined behavior.

The Syofyani Dance and Music Ensemble, under Syofyani's direction, presents *Pasambahan* Dance as a structured indoor ritual, adapted from the *Galombang* Dance yet transformed through lyrical and staccato phrasing. Unlike *Galombang*, which is typically performed outdoors and involves dynamic, communal movement, *Pasambahan* is more intimate and ceremonious. The movement quality flows between gliding footwork and precise gestures, with transitions that mimic conversation—questions and responses choreographed between dancers as hosts and symbolic guests.

Particular emphasis is placed on the figure of the *Carano* bearer—typically a female dancer distinguished by her elaborate *suntiang* (traditional headpiece). Her movement and position are marked by heightened ritual clarity. During the *pitunggua* (kneeling stance), her lowered posture and offering gesture act as a physical manifestation of sincerity, trust, and cultural generosity. The fact that the feet are never raised toward the audience reflects the *Minangkabau* ethic of *baso*, or proper decorum, maintaining visual modesty and humility throughout the performance.

Beyond individual movement characters, the overall form and manifestation of *Pasambahan* Dance are constructed through four essential elements of dance: body, space, energy, and time. Drawing from Langer's (1988) philosophical notion of form as “a unity resulting from interconnected articulations,” *Pasambahan* constructs its meaning not merely through movement but through how those movements interact within a defined ceremonial space.

Male dancers utilize wide, open spatial trajectories—entering, circling, and asserting presence—while female dancers utilize grounded, inward, and curved movements, often in place or in circular paths. This spatial dialectic supports the larger thematic interplay between protection and receptivity. Energetically, the male movements are punctuated by bursts of motion—often staccato or sharp—while the female movements are sustained, continuous, and fluid. The contrast in tempo—quickened male footwork juxtaposed with the measured, gentle rhythm of female gestures—creates a visual dialogue of tension and resolution, mirroring the ceremonial process itself.

Time, in this context, is not linear but ritualistic. Movements are not just choreographed to music but to meaning. The tempo varies to align with symbolic sequences: entrance and salutation, offering and acceptance, blessing and closure. The form is cyclical, echoing the circular nature of *Minangkabau* customs where every beginning carries within it the seeds of return. Thus, the form and movement character in Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance together construct an embodied narrative of *Minangkabau* identity. The dance is not merely a sequence of beautiful gestures; it is a performative grammar through which values of

kehormatan (honor), *keramahan* (hospitality), and *keselarasan* (social harmony) are articulated, transmitted, and sustained. In every bow, step, and turn, *Pasambahan* tells the story of a culture that speaks through the body—politely, powerfully, and with precision. The body positions of male and female dancers in the *Pasambahan* Dance by Syofyani are as shown in figure 1 and 4.

Detailed Movement Analysis and Cultural Interpretations of *Pasambahan* Dance

Pasambahan Dance is structured around deliberate and codified movement patterns that function not only as choreography but also as vessels of cultural meaning. Each sequence is imbued with layers of symbolism rooted in *Minangkabau* values. Male dancers perform dynamic movements adapted from *pencak silat*—swift hand gestures, grounded foot placements, and agile transitions—that collectively embody strength, vigilance, and protection. These movements reflect the ceremonial function of male figures in *Minangkabau* society: to guard, to welcome, and to uphold honor (*kehormatan*).

In contrast, female dancers move with controlled fluidity and gentle grace. Their arm gestures are soft, circular, and rhythmic; their footwork remains close to the floor, anchoring the body in humility and composure. These aesthetic choices are not arbitrary. Rather, they signify *keramahan* (hospitality) and *kesantunan* (politeness)—core virtues in *Minangkabau* femininity. Every gesture, from the curving of the wrist to the incline of the head, is a silent speech act, inviting the guest into the community’s spiritual space.

Each movement carries cultural specificity. The “*sambah*” gesture, where dancers lower their torsos while extending their arms forward, symbolizes deep respect and deference. “*Tapuak silek*,” a sharp, defensive gesture executed by male dancers, signifies preparedness and ceremonial alertness. Meanwhile, “*maambiak siriah*,” a gesture performed by female dancers mimicking the act of offering betel leaves, conveys sincerity and the warmth of welcome—underscoring the dancer’s symbolic role as the cultural gateway between host and guest.

Cultural Interpretations

At its core, *Pasambahan* Dance is not merely performance—it is a ritualized dialogue that communicates *Minangkabau* customs and religious-philosophical ideals. The dance enacts the principle of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*, which frames *Minangkabau* tradition as grounded in Islamic values. This is evident in the careful modesty of movement, the sincerity of offering, and the maintenance of decorum throughout the performance.

The *carano*—a traditional tray filled with betel leaves, areca nuts, and lime—is not simply a prop. It embodies the collective spirit of the community, representing generosity, purity of heart, and shared memory. Its presentation is a pivotal moment in the dance, as the act of offering and receiving the *carano* becomes a symbolic transaction of trust, reverence, and cultural allegiance.

The choreographic dialogue between male and female dancers reinforces the balance of gender roles in *Minangkabau* tradition. Male dancers, through bold and expansive movements, assert leadership and ceremonial authority. Female dancers, through subtler and more contained motions, represent emotional intelligence and social harmony. This contrast reflects not only biological distinction but cultural role assignment—one of presence and protection, the other of reception and resilience.

Gendered Performance and Symbolic Embodiment

Gender distinctions in *Pasambahan* Dance are encoded not only in movement vocabulary but also in choreographic structure and spatial dynamics. Male dancers typically execute grounded movements such as *pitunggua* (low squat stance), *sambak*, and *cabiak kain* (sharp diagonal arm sweeps), signaling control, readiness, and territorial marking. Their bodies project outward, commanding space with authority and strength.

Female dancers, by contrast, inhabit the space more modestly. Movements like *langkah si ganjua lalai* (delicate sidesteps) and *alu tataruang patah tigo* (circular hand motions) express receptivity and grace. Their energy is contained, internalized, and emotionally communicative—conveying social poise and empathy. Feet are kept close to the floor, reinforcing humility and respect for the ceremonial context.

However, this gendered division is not without critical tension. While *Minangkabau* society is matrilineal, performance spaces often remain dominated by masculine-coded aesthetics. Male dancers frequently assume central and mobile roles, whereas female dancers perform in supporting spatial positions. Informants interviewed in this study—especially younger practitioners—acknowledged this contradiction. Some saw the gender division as a necessary expression of cultural order, while others viewed it as outdated, calling for more fluid interpretations of role and visibility.

Symbolic Ambiguity of Ritual Objects

Objects like the *carano* and *sirih* (betel leaves) once held deep ritual significance as offerings of peace, friendship, and ancestral acknowledgment. However, contemporary interpretations are shifting. Interviews with younger dancers revealed that many now view these objects as ceremonial formalities or decorative properties. The *carano*, for example, was sometimes described as a “tourist item”—a symbolic relic more aesthetic than sacred. This points to a broader process of desacralization, where ritual symbols lose their original spiritual weight and become performative gestures shaped for public display or commodification. The symbolic ambiguity of these objects reveals the tension between cultural continuity and adaptive reinterpretation. While older dancers defend the sacred meaning of the *carano*, younger generations are more open to questioning its function and representation in today’s performative context.

Generational Shifts and Reinterpretation

Perhaps most telling is the generational gap in understanding and performing *Pasambahan* Dance. Senior dancers remain committed to preserving traditional structures, movement sequences, and symbolic codes. To them, fidelity to the original form ensures the integrity of cultural transmission. Conversely, younger dancers have shown greater interest in incorporating contemporary techniques, modifying rhythmic patterns, or simplifying gestures for wider accessibility—especially in non-traditional performance settings such as schools or cultural festivals. These internal debates reveal a living tradition in motion. The dance is not static but negotiable. While tension exists between innovation and preservation, this dialectic is essential to cultural survival. Rather than weakening tradition, such frictions invigorate it—allowing *Pasambahan* Dance to evolve while still resonating with its ancestral core.

***Pasambahan* Dance in Relation to Other *Minangkabau* Dance Traditions: Continuity, Transformation, and Critical Reflections**

Within the rich constellation of *Minangkabau* traditional performing arts, *Pasambahan* Dance holds a unique position as a ceremonial expression of hospitality and reverence. However, to fully grasp its significance, it must be understood in relation to other dances from the region that serve different social and symbolic purposes. Each dance, while grounded in *adat* (custom), articulates cultural meaning through distinct choreographic structures, functions, and performative aesthetics.

One of the most prominent forms is *Randai*, a theatrical genre that blends martial arts with dramatic storytelling. Performed in circular formations, *Randai* emphasizes collective memory and heroism, often recounting episodes from *Minangkabau* folklore. In contrast to the inward-focused formality of *Pasambahan*, *Randai* is extroverted and dialogic, engaging the audience not only through movement but also through spoken narrative and song. Its structure encourages ensemble interaction rather than ritual offering, positioning it as a communal medium of moral instruction.

Similarly, *Tari Piring* (Plate Dance) serves a different function altogether. Known for its swift footwork and rotational movements, it symbolizes gratitude and ritual offerings to ancestors or deities. The energy of *Tari Piring* is centrifugal—spinning outward with rhythm and risk, as dancers skillfully maneuver ceramic plates on their palms. Its exuberant tempo and technical daring contrast sharply with the composed, symbolic gestures of *Pasambahan*, which favors contained energy and codified forms of greeting.

Galombang Dance offers a closer comparison. Often performed at wedding ceremonies, *Galombang* features rows of male dancers executing martial arts-inspired movements in synchronized patterns. Like *Pasambahan*, it draws from *pencak silat* and embodies communal values such as unity and readiness. Yet *Galombang* typically precedes *Pasambahan* in ceremonial order, functioning as an opening display of honor before guests are formally welcomed. While both dances share structural and aesthetic elements, *Pasambahan* is marked by its nuanced duality—male strength balanced by female grace, all within a ceremonial logic of reception.

Performance Contexts and the Shifting Meaning of *Pasambahan* Dance

Traditionally embedded within the framework of *adat*, *Pasambahan* Dance was performed exclusively in ritual contexts—such as the reception of honored guests or the welcoming of a bride and groom. In these moments, every movement was a performative gesture loaded with spiritual intent and social obligation. However, as cultural performances increasingly migrate to tourism showcases, national festivals, and academic platforms, the function and meaning of *Pasambahan* have inevitably shifted.

In these new settings, the dance is recontextualized as a visual representation of *Minangkabau* identity rather than an embodied ritual of welcome. While the structure and costumes remain intact, the underlying emotional and spiritual resonance is often diminished. Informants noted that, when performed for tourists, the dance can become reduced to a “show” devoid of ceremonial gravity. The *carano* offering—once a sacred act of sincerity—is sometimes perceived merely as a stylized gesture. This aestheticization, while raising concerns of cultural dilution, also opens the dance to broader audiences and invites conversations on heritage awareness and cultural diplomacy.

Despite these transformations, *Pasambahan* Dance remains in dialogic relation with other *Minangkabau* dances. All these traditions negotiate their relevance in contemporary spaces, adapting form and meaning in response to audience expectations and sociopolitical shifts. While *Randai* integrates narrative expansion, and *Tari Piring* embraces spectacular risk, *Pasambahan* retains a quiet dignity, offering a meditative moment within the broader ecology of cultural performance.

Choreographic Authority and the Question of Representation

A significant dimension of this study involves the issue of choreographic authority. The prominence of Syofyani in the conceptualization and dissemination of *Pasambahan* Dance has led to a widely accepted canonization of form. His interpretations—meticulously documented and institutionally circulated—have shaped dominant understandings of what *Pasambahan* is and ought to be. However, the consolidation of a single artistic voice raises critical questions about representational plurality.

While Syofyani's contributions are undeniably foundational, relying solely on his vision risks marginalizing alternative practices and interpretations. Interviews with younger dancers and independent choreographers revealed a more diverse landscape of opinion. Some saw the codified gender roles and symbolic rigidity of the dance as reflective of outdated social models, advocating for greater flexibility and innovation. Others defended the traditional structure, arguing that its preservation safeguards cultural depth and moral transmission. These tensions illustrate that cultural authority is not static—it is contested, negotiated, and redefined through lived experience.

Pasambahan Dance stands at the crossroads of tradition and transformation. It is not a fixed artifact encased in ceremonial nostalgia, but a living, dynamic practice shaped by historical memory, bodily discipline, and generational discourse. Through comparative analysis with other *Minangkabau* dances, we see how *Pasambahan* both aligns with and diverges from broader choreographic trends, emphasizing subtlety, reverence, and symbolic refinement.

More than just a welcoming dance, *Pasambahan* functions as a choreographic text that embodies cultural values—honor, humility, communal balance—while remaining open to reinterpretation. Its symbols are not frozen; they fluctuate in meaning as context changes. Its aesthetic, while grounded in tradition, evolves with each performance, with each new generation of dancers who inherit not only its form but also the right to question and recreate it. In this way, *Pasambahan* Dance exemplifies the paradox of cultural heritage: it is most powerful when it is both preserved and allowed to grow. As long as its movements continue to be danced, taught, and reimagined, *Pasambahan* will remain not only relevant—but alive.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that Syofyani's *Pasambahan* Dance operates not only as a ceremonial performance but as a layered site of cultural discourse. The choreography encapsulates a gendered aesthetic that both reflects and reshapes *Minangkabau* values. While male dancers exude strength and dominance rooted in *pencak silat*, female dancers embody grace and hospitality through *silat bunga*-inspired movement. These contrasts signify not merely difference but structured negotiation of social roles within a performance context. Symbols such as the *carano* and *sirih*, once imbued with sacred significance, now encounter reinterpretation—particularly by younger dancers—shifting from spiritual to symbolic, from ritual to aesthetic display. This transformation speaks to broader concerns over cultural

sustainability in the face of commercialization, modern education, and tourism-driven performance demands.

The study also emphasizes that *Pasambahan* Dance should be understood through the lens of embodiment, positionality, and intergenerational dialogue. Artistic authority, often centralized in the figure of the maestro, needs to be balanced with lived experiences and evolving interpretations by younger practitioners. Ultimately, *Pasambahan* Dance is both a cultural archive and a living, adaptive tradition. Its persistence depends on the capacity of communities to nurture its relevance without fossilizing its form. Dance, in this sense, becomes not merely a product of tradition but a performative practice of cultural negotiation.

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