

ARTS & CULTURES

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Kuda Kepang

By Noraziah Mohd Amin

One of the traditional dances in Malaysia that has been declared not in line with the teachings of this country's official religion, Islam is kuda kepeng dance. Kudang kepeng means "braided horse". This dance originated from Johor, and it is believed that it was brought there from the Javanese people.

A kuda kepeng group can consist of 25 people where five people are the musicians, 15 are the dalangs and 9 are the dancers. It is said that the kuda kepeng dancers cannot see anything in the color red as this will attract their attention and influence them to become wild. Usually, the dancers are males as this dance was once associated with warding off evil spirits. Anyone who wants to learn this dance will need to practice "patigeni" which is fasting the whole day and "tirakat" which refers to fasting during the day and then the fasting continues again after 12 am. He or she will also need to be a recluse for a few days.

A braided horse is made of leather usually from buffalo, or bamboo straws plaited or woven in a shape of a horse. Besides, a braided horse normally has a few shades of striking colors like red, yellow and brown. Before the braided horse is used for dancing, a "dalang" (a person who controls kuda kepeng dancers) will burn incense and the horse is exposed to the incense smoke while reciting some mantra for calling the spirit in the surrounding area to enter the horse. The spirit is said to be responsible for mesmerizing the audience with extraordinary dance moves and antics.



A local newspaper, BH Plus's journalist, Azrul Affandi Sobry interviewed the former kuda kepeng performers and "dalangs" or "pawang". The dancers are described as being in a trance ("kemabukan") or "possessed" when their minds are taken over and controlled by the kudang kepeng spirits, where they become no longer their normal selves to the extent that they could do incredible acts like eating glass, peeling a coconut using their teeth or breaking a coconut with their heads. It is said that the dancers demand attar oil as their drink and sugarcane as their food from time to time during their performance while still being in trance. Kuda kepeng dance is presented with gamelan music. It is believed that if the music stops, the dancers in the trance will not be happy with this and the music must go on until the spirits are taken out of the dancers' bodies and the dancers become their normal selves again. The dalang sometimes hits the dancers with a whip if they turn into sort of "wild horses". Also, the noise of the whip hitting the ground is used by a dalang to scare a dancer and tame them.



It is said that kuda kepeng is prohibited from being performed with some rituals that are against the teachings of Islam ("khurafat"). For example, to "open the ring" ("buka gelanggang"), there is a mantra that says, "Assalamualaikum, jin, Nini Danyang dan Kaki Danyang...Insun amati ajiku, siboyo poro" is part of the mantra to call the spirits around the place to come and approve the kuda kepeng performance.

According to Azrul Affandi Sobry, Pasukan Kuda Kepang Persatuan Warisan Seni Sri Johor no longer practices the traditional performance of kuda kepeng dance but the modern version of it, which does not involve ritualistic acts like summoning the spirits that were clearly against the teachings of Islam. Kuda kepeng dance can be perceived as Johor's heritage that should be preserved. However, tradition can be changed to meet the need of adhering to Islamic rules and anything that is an act of "syirik" (shirk or attributing a partner or rival to Allah in lordship) should be completely eliminated and replaced with something that is acceptable in Islam.

