

TARI DABUS: MANIFESTATION OF MALAY HEROISM RITUAL

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Received: February 25th 2026

Accepted: March 15th, 2026

Published: March 31st, 2026

ABSTRACT

Tari Dabus is a traditional performing art of Perak, Malaysia, originating in self-defence rituals and still practised over 300 years later. This study aims to emphasise the concept of *Tari Dabus*, the heroism that is exhibited by players' intelligence, dexterity, bravery, and cheerfulness when performed. Every *Tari Dabus* performer uses a type of sharp iron called *anak dabus* as a unique performance feature. *Anak dabus* is intended to show the dance as a symbol of heroism, reflecting the performance's identity. This study seeks to explain the relationship between behaviour and culture through a qualitative, ethnographic approach. Ethnographers try to separate the eemic perspective, the point of view of the culture being studied, and the eetic perspective, which is the point of view from outside the culture being studied. The analysis of this study focuses on several aspects of the *Tari Dabus* performance that manifest the concept of heroism. The implications of this study are beneficial for preserving and conserving local wisdom to ensure its sustainability.

Keywords: Heroism; Manifestation; Rituals; *Tari Dabus*; Sustainable

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Traditional Malay dance still has a special place among the multi-racial Malaysian community. Its uniqueness is not only reflected in the costumes, props, music, songs, and *lenggok* dance, but also in the ritual functions that align with the beliefs and views of the local community. In the state of Perak, several types of dances have been inherited since ancient times, such as *Dabus* Dance, *Bubu* Dance, *Lukah* Dance, and others (Mohd Ghouse Nasaruddin, 1994). *Tari Dabus* is the most popular dance and is closely associated with the community, especially in Perak. *Tari Dabus* is believed to have been performed for over 300 years. The performance combines several aspects, namely music and songs, drums and gongs, poetry (*zikir*), and dancers who shake the *anak dabus*, which rustles as they dance. The poetry presented in the form of *zikir* rhythm is a mixture of Malay and Arabic poetry (*zikir*). The highlight of *Tari Dabus* is the scene of stabbing the *anak dabus* (props in the form of sharp weapons) on one of the limbs to show the dancer's reliability and invulnerability. The *Tari Dabus*, which has been performed for hundreds of years, is a heritage that is still preserved today. In terms of the performance's uniqueness, each *Tari Dabus* performer, especially the dancer, uses the main prop: the *anak dabus*. Historically, the props used are limited to the *anak dabus*. However, several other sharp weapons are also used to showcase the heroic value of this dance. However, in the context of this study, the group that still maintains this performance uses only the *anak dabus* as the main prop. Until now, the *Tari Dabus* is still performed to preserve cultural heritage and traditions under the management of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the story, the *Tari Dabus* was introduced by the followers of Sayidina Ali (the Shia) from the Middle East, performed to demonstrate the greatness and invulnerability of the Shia people in a war environment, so that the opposing party would not dare to disturb them. This story is said to have started when Caliph Zainal Abidin, the son of Saidina Hassan and grandson of Saidina Ali, became the ruler. During his reign, a dispute between two factions led to war. So, as an effort to scare the opposing party, the group that supported Saidina Ali created the *Tari Dabus*. At that time, several specialties could be performed by the *Tari Dabus* players, namely climbing on swords, being crushed by stones, wading in fire, being bitten by poisonous snakes, and stabbing a dabus child in the limbs (Rahimah Haji Ahmad, 1975). This was done to demonstrate their invulnerability and reliability as warriors. The wounds they suffered during the action would be healed by the group leader, known as the caliph (shaman/khalifah/bomoh), upon completion of the performance.

From there, *Tari Dabus* is said to have spread and developed in the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago), especially in Aceh, where it was known as *daboh*, brought by traders from Arab lands. From Aceh, *Tari Dabus* spread to several other regions in the Nusantara, including Banten, where it was known as *debus*, and Bugis and Perak (Malaysia), where it was known as *dabus*. However, the difference is only in the pronunciation (dialect) of the language, not in the content of the *Tari Dabus* itself, which demonstrates the invulnerability and reliability of the dancers as warriors. The development of *Tari Dabus* in Malaya at that time began around 1600 AD, when two traders from Batu Bahara, titled *Nakhoda Lembang* and *Nakhoda Topah*, migrated to

the state of Perak and settled in the *Telaga Nenas* area, Sitiawan, Perak. While in the area, they often practised and performed Dabus Dance at night, attracting the attention of the local population. As a result, Dabus Dance began to be studied and developed in Sitiawan, Perak. From there, the Dabus Dance continued to develop to the areas of Pasir Panjang Laut, Bagan Datoh, Kampung Gajah and Kuala Selangor. *Nakhoda Lembang* and *Nakhoda Topah* introduced and taught the *Tari Dabus* in every area they visited, allowing it to develop and be inherited to this day, especially in the state of Perak, Malaysia Department (JKKN, <https://pemetaanbudaya.jkkn.gov.my/state/category/culture/94>).

However, there are differing opinions about the arrival of *Tari Dabus* in Perak. The first opinion says that *Tari Dabus* was brought by Ahmad Mahyuddin, who came from Persia (Baghdad) around 1785. He was a student of a teacher named Muhammad Abil Hassan Al-Rifai. Then it spread to Pasir Panjang Laut, Sitiawan, Lumut, Sungai Nipah Baroh, Sungai Balai Baroh, and Teluk Intan. The second opinion says that *Tari Dabus* was initially brought to Indonesia via Pasai in Aceh before being developed to Pasir Panjang, Perak by Nakhoda Lembang, who had studied with the merchant Fakir Muhammad from India, who was also a student of the teacher Muhammad Abil Hassan Al-Rifai.

Meanwhile, another opinion says that Ahmad Mahyuddin, who had studied with Muhammad Abil Hassan Al-Rifai, met Nakhoda Lembang from Batu Bara, Aceh, who studied with Fakir Muhammad from India in 1785. Together, they developed *Tari Dabus* in the state of Perak, specifically in Pasir Panjang, as early as the 1700s (Shafiee Ahmad & Sulaiman Zakaria, 1992). Until now, several locations in the state of Perak still practice *Tari Dabus* performances, namely in Bagan Datoh, Hilir Perak district; Kampung Pasir Panjang Laut, Sitiawan, Manjung district; and Kampung Tanjung Bidara, Pulau Tiga, Central Perak district.

Highlighting History: during the Anglo-Dutch period of control over the tin industry in Perak around 1680-1690, they built a plant in Teluk Gedung, Pulau Pangkor. At the same time, there was a Malay warrior named Panglima Kulop Mentok who hated Dutch colonialism very much. He is said to be a relative of the Bugis King from Sulawesi. Panglima Kulop, who could not stand the cruelty of the Dutch, immediately took himself and his followers to establish a settlement on Pulau Sembilan. As a result of his hatred for the Dutch, he fought the colonialist merchant ships and demolished the Dutch plant and fort in Teluk Gedung. Because he was too angry with Panglima Kulop's actions, the Dutch called him a pirate. According to the story, Panglima Kulop and his followers are said to have used the mystical knowledge of the *Dabus* warriors when attacking and fighting with Dutch soldiers, resulting in many Dutch soldiers being killed. Because he could not stand the threat of Panglima Kulop, the Dutch finally fled and left their artificial plant in Teluk Gedung.

The greatness of the *Dabus* warriors was also acknowledged by the British colonialists who colonised Malaya after the Dutch withdrew. In 1826, the Perak government lent the Pangkor Island area to the British. This was later followed by the Manjung district (formerly known as Dinding), which was also handed over to the British colonialists around 1874. Therefore, the Straits of Malacca became an important trade route and a base for British rule in Penang and Pangkor Island. At one point, the British faced a

threat from a group of pirates terrorising the waters of the Straits of Malacca, led by Panglima Daeng Mentanu. The British then asked the Dabus warriors from Manjung, Perak, for help in fighting the pirates. A total of 100 Dabus warriors are said to have successfully eliminated all of the pirates (Amran Abdullah & Hamidah Husain, 1993).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods, adopting ethnography as its strategy. Ethnography is a research strategy developed by anthropologists that focuses on the relationship between behaviour and culture. Ethnographers try to understand and separate the emic perspective from the etic perspective. Emic means explaining cultural phenomena through the perspective of society. Eetic explains cultural phenomena through the perspective of individuals who are not involved in the society being studied. Therefore, ethnography is an effort to describe culture. To implement the ethnographic method through observation and participation, the researcher went to the study location to meet ethnic Dabus Dance performance practitioners in Kampung Pulau Tiga, Perak Tengah district. Specifically, interviews were conducted with the main informant, namely Mat Rosnan bin Hashim, Dabus Traditional Group, Kg. Tanjung Bidara Pulau Tiga, Kampung Gajah, Perak, Malaysia. The interview method was used to obtain information directly from the informant, using two techniques: focused and group interviews. Both of these techniques support the information obtained through the observation method. Interviews that focus on individuals involve Dabus Dance players. Interviews with informants were specifically conducted with the leader of the Dabus Dance group to obtain in-depth information. The information obtained was first screened before being analysed using appropriate analytical techniques.

4.0 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.1 Malay Heroism

Referring to the Dewan Dictionary (Fourth Edition), a hero is a brave and courageous person; a brave fighter; a hero: homeland; heroism refers to bravery (brave to fight, etc.) and courage. The rise of the Malay Empire of Malacca in the early 15th century and later the intervention of foreign powers in the administration of the Malay states have encouraged the local community to practice the art of self-defence (silat). Thus, there are many reliable and trustworthy Malay warriors. Almost all groups in society, including villagers, royals, and women, have learned and mastered self-defence (silat). Famous Malay warriors, among them are Hang Tuah, Datuk Bahaman, Mat Kilau, Dol Said, Tok Janggut, Mat Salleh, Datuk Maharaja Lela, Tok Gajah, Datuk Bentara Luar Johor, Rentap and Tun Perak. These warriors have the following characteristics of Malay heroism (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015):

1. A Malay warrior must undergo various stages and tests in martial arts to build discipline, courage, and humility. The status and rank of a warrior depend on the devotion poured out, the integrity maintained, and the progress achieved.

2. A Malay warrior who is skilled in martial arts does not need any weapons to defeat his enemy.
3. A Malay warrior must adhere to certain ethics both in battle and in peace. The two fighting groups must agree on the rules of the fight before it begins. These rules include the date, time, rest period, the beginning and end of the fight and so on. Such a fight not only brings victory to one side but also ensures justice to both sides. Anyone who is injured must be given treatment, while the deceased must be buried. If one side retreats from the battlefield, it indicates that it has admitted defeat and that absolute victory is in favour of the opponent.
4. A Malay warrior usually wears short, loose pants that reach the knee and a short shirt, tied around the waist with a cloth.
5. A cloth headband is wrapped around the head, neatly arranging the hair.
6. A *keris*, and sometimes another small weapon, will be inserted into the belt.
7. A Malay warrior also usually carries a spear and a shield made of iron, leather, rattan or wood.

1.1. *Tari Dabus*

Tari Dabus is a combination of three arts: music (song), dance, and martial arts (heroism). The elements of the performance include *anak dabus*, *sensuan*, *khalifah*, musicians, songs, and dancers, which are included in the performance structure. *Anak dabus* is the most important tool (props) that characterises the uniqueness of the Dabus Dance performance. The shape of the *anak dabus* resembles a pointed, sharp weapon at its base, while the end is in the form of a two-, three-, or four-branched network (as shown in Figure 2), like flower petals. On each radius of the petal, a ring is usually hung to produce sound when shaken by the dancer during the performance.

A *Tari Dabus* group usually consists of approximately 22 performers, including the *khalifah*, musicians and dancers. The *khalifah* is the leader of the *Tari Dabus* group and is also known as a *bomoh* or shaman. The *khalifah* is responsible for ensuring the players' safety from any interference that could mar their performance. As a performance that comes from a ritual ceremony, *sajian* (offerings) is an important element in the *Tari Dabus*. Therefore, when the performance is about to begin, the *khalifah* will burn incense (*kemeyan*) and sprinkle water that has been enchanted throughout the performance space, to all the players (dancers and musicians) and the *dabus*. The purpose is to prevent evil spirits from disturbing the players during the performance. To strengthen the effectiveness of the curse spell, food is needed.

Incense (*kemeyan*) is burned in a special container called a *perasap*. Before the performance begins, incense (*kemeyan*) is smoked around the performance space (*gelanggang*). Incense (*kemeyan*) is also used to smoke performance equipment such as *anak dabus* and dancers before they enter the arena. *Sajian* are also sprinkled and watered throughout the arena and its surrounding areas to keep away unwanted disturbances. For example, *air tepung tawar* (fresh water) is sprinkled on the rice while it is being stirred, and turmeric rice is sprinkled with turmeric. Fresh flour water sprinkles consist of leaves such as *kabun* leaves, *sepulih* leaves, *setawar* leaves, *sambar* leaves and *ati-ati hitam* leaves. The leaves are tied into a thumb-sized bundle and immersed in a bowl of water. The selection of the leaves is based on the curses possessed by the leaves themselves. For example, *sepulih* leaves are a healer,

setawar leaves are a cure, and *kabun* and sambar leaves are curses for spirits. *Pemulih* water is also important for washing wounds on the dancers' arms after dabus stabbings. The *pemulih* water mixture consists of sliced banana leaves (umbut pisang), *setawar* leaves, betel leaves, and sliced lemongrass stems.

Apart from that, several taboos must be observed by every Tari Dabus performer, including:

1. The *gelanggang* (performance space) where the performance is performed must be clean.
2. The player's body must also be clean and pure.
3. The players, whether musicians or dancers, are prohibited from gossiping, using obscene language, and being hostile to one another.
4. The *anak dabus* must always be well and perfectly cared for; that is, it must not be stepped on, it must not be pointed at the stomach and head, and it must not be poked into the ground.
5. The *anak dabus* must not be placed with its sharp eyes pointing towards the sky.
6. The *anak dabus* must not be held or touched by a woman who is menstruating.
7. Outsiders (audience) who are not *Tari Dabus* players are prohibited from touching all performance equipment, especially the *anak dabus*.

Therefore, if the stated taboos are violated, it is feared that it will invite undesirable events during the Dabus Dance performance.

4.2 Structure of the Tari Dabus Performance

The *Tari Dabus* performance begins with the *memulih gelanggang* (restore the court) ceremony, which is carried out by the *khalifah* or *bomoh* (shaman) by reciting a spell or mantra on a piece of incense (*kemeyan*), which reads as follows:

*Bismillah-hirrahmanirrahim,
Assalamualaikum ya kemeyan,
dijadikan Allah dari getah kayu yang putih,*

After the spell is cast (mantra recitation), the incense (*kemeyan*) is burned and applied to all the performance equipment used. Then the *khalifah* sprinkles *bertih*, turmeric rice and *tepung tawar* around the performance space. The purpose of this ceremony is to prevent interference from evil spirits and acts of treachery against the Dabus Dance players who will perform.

After the ceremony of *memulih gelanggang* is completed, the singer will sing a *nashyid dabus* (zikir) song, accompanied by the musicians' beating of the *dabus rebana* and *gong*. Then the musicians and singers continue to play *dabus* songs taken from the *Berzanji* and *Marhaban* books. The singing form consists of '*sekali hadi* (chorus) and *sekali jawab*'. *Hadi* is usually taken from the *Berzanji* books. At the same time, the *jawab* is the singer's own invention in Malay, such as praising the beauty of Malaysia, a woman, or offering praise and advice. The first *hadi* is known as *tanagal*, and the first *jawab* is known as *muradiseng*. The second *hadi* is *Fa-ohesan*, and the answer is

Allah Ya Allah, while the third *hadi* is *Bishahrin*, and the answer is *Allahummasalli*. One example of the song presented is as follows:

*Mu ra di seng Allah mu ra di seng
Kama la izin Allah mura... di*

Originally, there were two *zikir* or *nashyid dabus* songs in Arabic, but they have now been translated into Malay. However, the meaning remains the same: to worship and praise the greatness of Allah and the greatness of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. The lyrics of the *dabus zikir* that are usually sung as a sign for the dancers to enter the arena are as follows:

*Besi tua Allah besi muda
Besi datang daripada Allah
Hendak makan sifat Muhammad*

Simultaneously with the song, one of the dancers will enter the arena to start the dance. Before starting the step, the dancer will sit cross-legged with both hands holding a pair of *dabus*, one in the right hand and the other in the left hand. At the same time, the dancer will take three steps forward, then three steps back, and bow to the audience in respect. The dancer will then stand up to start the dance solo until the song is finished. Then a pair of *masuk* dancers performed, followed by four other pairs. The meaning of a pair here is not necessarily a man and a woman; it can be that both dancers are men or vice versa.

There are three types of dance steps, namely '*susun sireh*', '*ayun tajak*' and '*helang sewah*'. However, the order or arrangement of the dance steps performed is determined by the dancers' choice, which has been agreed upon by the group members. However, each dance step usually begins with the *susun sireh* movement, which serves as the performance's opening. Meanwhile, each song and dance performed takes about ten minutes. At the climax of the performance, the dancers will enter the subconscious (liminal) while poking the *anak dabus* on their arms. This scene lasts several moments, until each dancer takes turns facing the *khalifah*, who also enters the performance space. The *khalifah* will begin his function to restore the dancers' consciousness and the wounds suffered as a result of the *anak dabus* stabbing on their arms. The *khalifah* will wash the dancers' arms with a serving of healing water accompanied by the recitation of a spell that reads, "your bones are iron, your skin is copper". If possible, the wounds caused by the *anak dabus* stabbing will be squeezed, and the *khalifah* will cast a mantra (doa) to heal them from the first verse of Surah Al-'Lahab, which reads: "*Tabbat ya da abi la ha bi wattab*". A complete *Tari Dabus* performance usually takes about 30 minutes. When the performance is finished, the *khalifah* will gather all the *anak dabus* to be cleaned, accompanied by the recitation of a *doa*.

5.0 DISCUSSION

In this regard, the discussion description of the performance structure and elements of *Tari Dabus* indeed emphasises the manifestation of heroism as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Manifestations of Heroism in *Tari Dabus*

Dramatic Structure	Elements	Manifestation of Heroism
<i>Memulih gelanggang</i> (Restore the court) ceremony	<i>Khalifah/Sajian</i> (Offerings)	Mystic Bravery Helping
This incense (kemeyan) is burned and diffused	<i>Sajian</i> (Offerings)/ <i>Khalifah</i>	Honest Moral
Reciting spells or incantations (mantra/doa) on incense (kemeyan)	<i>Sajian</i> (Offerings)/ <i>Khalifah</i>	Protective Selfless Sacrificing
Singing nasyid songs	Song/Singer/Musician	Strong
Dancers enter the arena (<i>gelanggang</i>)	Dancer	Extraordinary Merit
Dancer pokes arm	Dancer	Loyal
The Caliph (<i>Khalifah</i>) heals the wounds and restores the dancers	<i>Khalifah/Sajian</i> (Offerings)/ Dancer	
<i>Anak dabus</i> was cleansed and bewitched by the <i>Khalifah</i>	<i>Anak Dabus/Khalifah</i>	

Referring to Table 1, the dramatic structure of the performance begins with a *memulih gelanggang* ceremony to restore the arena, involving the *Khalifah*, who recites spells (mantra) while inhaling incense (kemeyan). The manifestation of heroism in this scene emphasises that mystical knowledge is a characteristic of a Malay warrior. Starting from this mystical knowledge, it creates courage in a warrior. With this courage, the musicians begin their play, accompanied by singers who sing *nashyid* songs in time with the rhythm of the song being played. This scene of music and singing is the mutual assistance of a warrior supporting the dancers to follow the next scene; namely, the dancers will dance to the rhythm of the *nashyid* song being played. In the climax of the performance, the dancers prick the *anak dabus* on their arms as a manifestation of courage, invulnerability, bravery, and a willingness to sacrifice as a selfless warrior. This is also a manifestation of Malay heroism, which has extraordinary privileges. In the final phase of the performance, the *Khalifah* plays his role as a leader by restoring the dancers and healing their wounds through the recitation of prayers and spells. This scene is a celebration of Malay heroism, protective, moral, and loyal.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Therefore, based on the analysis of the performance structure and elements of the *Tari Dabus*, it is clear that it is a self-defence ritual. The dancers poking the *anak dabus*

on their arms during the climax of the performance symbolise the invulnerability and courage of a warrior. This behaviour is done when the dancer is unconscious after being bewitched by the *khalifah*. When the performance is over, the caliph restores the dancers with a spell or mantra, along with food. The *Tari Dabus* is not purely an entertainment dance, as it symbolises Malay heroism and embodies local wisdom. So, its role and contribution in defending sovereignty and raising the dignity of the nation are significant, especially for the state of Perak, and the effort to preserve this heritage is justified.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was made possible by the generous HICoE funding, KPT.BP(S).400-2/4/4 Jld.2(14) from the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia and the Institut Seni Kreatif Nusantara (INSAN) Universiti Teknologi MARA.

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