LUNSAY: SONG-DANCE OF THE JAMA MAPUN OF SULU

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IN THE WIDE WATERS BETWEEN BORNEO, PALAWAN, AND Jolo is an oasis of an island known as Cagayan de Sulu. The native people of this island call themselves Jama Mapun; their island, Tana Mapuan; their language Pelun Mapun. Literally, “Jama” means “man or people,” hence Jama Mapun means “people of Mapun.” These people, like the Taosugs and Samals of Sulu, are Muslim Filipinos; they have been Islamized for many years but, like the Christian Filipinos, they retain much of their traditional practices and customs. One of these customs, which may go back to their pre-Islamic past, is a popular community dance called lunsay.

The lunsay, to be more exact, is a song-and-dance; the participants sing and dance at the same time. Lasting the entire night, the lunsay is the most popular social activity and form of entertainment among the Jama Mapun, particularly during wedding celebrations. To an outsider unfamiliar with the dance, the lunsay may seem too long, too monotonous, and too tiring. But the observer easily changes his impression about the dance as soon as he sees the genuine enjoyment in the faces of both participants and spectators. In a simple society like that of the Jama Mapun, such a social event as the lunsay combines the functions of a movie, a nightclub, and a teen-agers’ party in an urban society. Hence, its great popularity. But, aside from its multifaceted social function, the lunsay, in itself, is an attractive and intricate dance that could rank with the best among the choreographic and musical traditions of the Philippines.

The following description of a lunsay came out of an actual performance observed by the author in Dubul Batu, a barrio on the northern tip of Cagayan de Sulu on the night of June 11, 1963. But the samples of lunsay verses were recorded later (June 30 of the same year), from the dictation of Mrs. Jamahilan Bandulan of barrio Dumdunay; her husband, Councilor Bandulan Aming, helped in the translation. My thanks naturally goes to them and to my Jama Mapun friends for their help and hospitality.

An essential element of the lunsay is the sound of clicking bamboo floors, under the impact of dancing feet struck in punctuated, unified cadences. To obtain this effect, a second set of bamboo flooring is laid crosswise over the original bamboo floor of the house. Both sets of split-bamboo flooring consist of bamboo strips—one and a half inch wide, tied side by side with rattan or some other native vine. The second set is laid in such a way that the striking surfaces are the hard, shiny, outer skin of the bamboo; in the Dubul

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1 Cagayan de Sulu is some 120 km. north, northeast of Sandakan, Borneo; 220 km. southeast of Balabac, Palawan; 300 km. west, northwest of Jolo; and 400 km. directly west of Zamboanga City.
Batu performance, the entire house floor measured approximately 20 feet square. Over the center of the floor, a kerosene lamp was hung. The lunsay is an all night affair.

Before touching on the dance itself, a word should be said about the time element. The lunsay literally lasts the whole night. It is a marathon of a dance, a sheer astonishment to twist-strained city dwellers. The one I observed lasted from 8:00 o'clock at night to 6:00 o'clock in the morning. Just how the dancers managed to sustain their vigor and interest, I can only wonder.

The lunsay is a group dance. Essentially, it is a coil or spiral of hand-holding dancers. This string of dancers—one end of which are male and the other, female—can be lengthened or shortened as dancers join in or drop out. If there are only a few dancers, they take the form of a circle; if many, the dancers form themselves into a spiral, with the females occupying the inner coil. In a circle, the links between the male-end and the female-end normally do not hold hands directly; they may use a handkerchief, a stick, or a piece of string.

A clockwise and a counterclockwise movement characterizes the lunsay. The clockwise movement goes with a slow tempo and long plaintive songs; the counterclockwise, with fast, vigorous steps and accelerated singing. There is an alternation of movements manifesting the mood of the dancers: now, the slow clockwise (step-left) movement; then, the lively countermovement (step-right), then back again to the restful tempo. This alternation of the quiet and the quick goes on through the night of a lonely island.

With the dancers having taken circular positions, the dance invariably with the slow movement. The boys first intone a lunsay verse like

\[
\begin{align*}
Pilambuy kadudunan, \\
pinudji pinubunan.
\end{align*}
\]

(Let me describe you, my maiden friend.)

Then the girls repeat and reecho the tune but in different, appropriate words, something like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
Daa nadu pudji na, \\
adat na tabati na.
\end{align*}
\]

(Describe me not, I'm still unknown to you.)

Both sides continue this answering-back-and-forth for some time, varying their verses and answers, until the change of movement is signalled by a new verse and a new tune from any of the male dancers; sometimes, the signal comes from the girls. But while the dancers are engaged in the slow, rhythmical movement, with everybody step-dancing to the left, the plaintive re-echoing of melodies and meaningful words (to the Mapuns if not to the observer) creates a strange air of incantation. When this has been carried on for sometime, and an enchanting effect begins to suffuse the participants, then someone among the boys decides it is time to move in the opposite direction with a faster beat. A new tune is intoned, and there is a braking effect in the string of dancers as each orients himself or herself to a new direction. The shift is not sudden but gradual, like the easy speed buildup of a starting train. But
the subtle beginning towards a new tempo and tune is clearly manifest in
the dancers’ poise and mood. Everybody now is stepping to the right. There
is a new upsurge of life, a rising tide of enthusiasm and awakening. In no
time, the circling coil swings into a hearty tempo, the boys’ feet-beat breaking
now and then into double tempo. Soon, a violent enthusiastic movement
develops and vibrates thru the undulating line of singing bodies; the boys
erupt into a sustained double beat, their singing reaching higher peaks of
volume and speed, and the girls responding properly in beautiful rhythmic,
swinging steps—their responses re-echoing harmoniously. The whole floor and
the entire house vibrate to this vehement but controlled display of enthusiasm
for life. Like the rise and fall of a mighty wave, the lunsay subsides also
from its peak and resumes the initial restful melody. And so it goes on through
the night. The joy of the dancers is reflected in the faces of the spectators
who sit and squat around, smiling with approval and pleasure.

The most common occasion for the performance of a lunsay is a wedding
celebration or ngawin. On the night of the wedding, the newly married cou­
ples are displayed in their finery to the admiring gazes of visitors and rela­
tives. Several times during this night of display, the bride and the groom
change their colorful wedding costumes into other brilliant ones for the en­
tertainment of those around. Food and drink are never lacking. Meanwhile,
in another part of the house, the favorite lunsay is held for those who prefer
dancing to bride-and-bridegroom-gazing. Sometimes also, a lunsay will be or­
ganized for special occasions when, for instance, there is a newcomer or visit­
or in the community. This was the case in Dubul Batu.

The usual theme of the lunsay is the most popular theme the world
over: love. The boy desires the girl; the girl responds coyly and favorably,
or coldly but politely. All throughout the songs, the characteristic indirectness
of Filipinos is noticeable. Seldom is the second person used as a form of
address; responses are voiced in the third person. In the following examples
of lunsay verses, the English translation is arbitrarily free and direct. I was
more interested in getting implied meaning of the verses than the literal ren­
dition which would convey the spirit of the songs less. Examples of the lunsay
songs given here are but a fraction of the total number of verses that could
actually be recorded from a whole night of singing. There are six types of
songs, depending on the number of verses in each song. There are songs with
two, four, six, eight, ten, and twelve verses. Only three types are given
here. A study and analysis of their melody patterns still awaits a tape re­
cording of these beautiful songs.

The Jama Mapun continue to live in their home island, Tana Mapun or
Cagayan de Sulu, and they continue to dance and sing their lunsay. It should
please all Filipinos to know that the Bayanihan and other dance troupes have
more treasures in the South awaiting them. It will not be long before the
choreographic genius and musical soul of our leading Filipino artists will
transform and develop the lunsay into the level of the singkil or the pag­
diwata.
Sample verses from the lunsay song of the Jama Mapun: Kalang Dua
(2-verse songs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAPUN</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lal:* Pilambuy keductunan</td>
<td>Let me describe you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinudji pinuhunan</td>
<td>my maiden friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan:* daa nadu pudji na</td>
<td>Describe me not,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adat sa tahati na</td>
<td>I'm still unknown to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy dudun kasi</td>
<td>Let me praise you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinuhunan pinudji</td>
<td>my lady friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: daa nuda sipat na</td>
<td>Judge me not,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nia tahati adat na</td>
<td>I'm still a stranger to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy ku Subidan</td>
<td>Let me extol you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinudji binaidan</td>
<td>my cherished friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: bong ko doman nanopat</td>
<td>Know me first,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngadji nadu ko adat</td>
<td>before speaking of me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy ikomayang</td>
<td>Your long, wavy hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nia lagu pinahayang</td>
<td>stays moist in the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: daa du ko kiaka</td>
<td>Ask not about a girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaam boho sikita</td>
<td>you have just met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy patta haut</td>
<td>Let me describe you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinuhunan sinabbut</td>
<td>you with a graceful form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: daa du kiaka Minu</td>
<td>Ask her not, my dear man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaam boho sittemu</td>
<td>you have just met her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy ayad patta</td>
<td>Let me look at you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinuhunan inanda</td>
<td>you with the fair form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: daa du kiaka Nakay</td>
<td>Ask her not, my dear man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boho-boho sumampay</td>
<td>you are yet a stranger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy lalisedung</td>
<td>Let me gaze at you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinuhunan pinatung</td>
<td>you with the perfect form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan: daa kiaka Andu</td>
<td>Ask her not, my poor man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boho-boho dumunggu</td>
<td>you are yet a stranger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lal: Pilambuy andu-andu</td>
<td>Let me come near you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinuhunan nidunggu</td>
<td>sweet little friend.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*“lal” and “dan” refer to “lalla” and “danda” meaning male and female respectively.*
Ask not, my dear man, you are but new here.

Let me tease you, you with the spotless form.

Ask not, you anxious man, you are new to the place.

Let me observe you, my royal friend.

Ask not, my dear man, you are stranger to the house.

Let me take you from this place you with the graceful gait.

Ask not, my dear friend, you are a newcomer to Mapun.

If it pleases you, my friend, let us renew our promises.

Think no more of them, our promises are no more.

If it pleases you, my friend, let us renew the bond of friendship.

Think no more of it, our promise has been broken.

If it pleases you, dear friend, our friendship has since faded.

Ask me no more, my young friend our friendship has since faded.

If it pleases you, let me remind you of our love.

Ask me no more, my friend, our love is now dead and faded.

If it pleases you, let us rekindle our love.

Ask me no more, dear man, our love has now vanished.
LUNSAY: SONG-DANCE OF THE JAMA MAPUN

If it pleases you, lovely friend, let the world know of our love.
Ask me no more, my dear man, our love is now lost.
If it pleases you, lovely friend, let all know of our friendship.
Ask me no more, my dear man, our friendship has been lost.
If it pleases you, my friend, let us proclaim our vows.
Ask me no more, my dear man, our vows have been since forgotten.
If it pleases you, my dear, let us realize our promises.
Ask me no more, sweet friend, they are changed and are no longer.

Kalang Mpat (4-verse songs)

It is true once I did love you but all that now is forgotten
love is gone like dirt
washed clean from the body.
Alas what can we do
my good friend
we can only but be resigned
to promises unfulfilled.
It is true in days gone by
you were in my heart
now all that is past
carried away like leaves in a stream.
It is fate, willed by the gods
let us not quarrel over it
let us accept and be resigned
to promises unfulfilled.
If I may plead with you
I beg of you, my dear,
let's try to be one again
redeem our broken love.
dan: kumaduhung sakkat na As we have drifted apart
da'a na upama na cease now from your striving
bong luu subahat na once the bond is broken
ule langgung maha na reunion is hard and vain.

lal: bagay bongsi tadjungjung If I may plead with you
junjung ku man usba na let me beg from your elders
pinagbulihan langgung let us once again unite
kau-kau kadana perchance fate had made you mine.

dan: bila luu niat na If you have the desire
tat-tap na iniakin remember and bear in mind
pasampay palahat na you must come and visit my place
balangkali pangantin perchance we may be fated to be one.

lal: umanat niawalihan Message of love I’ll send
pam-man kadudunan message to my beloved
langgung pinagbulihan if perchance there is a way
tong luu kampunan to our sought for union.

dan: sumping salimayu na Flower of salimayu
sabihan nu niaku tell what I say
minsan pooy tuyo na even how much he tries
aud na le magjatu hard is the sought for union.

lal: umanat niawalihan Message of love I’ll send
pasampayun kakasi may it reach her
langgung pinagbulihan I’ll cease not from striving
balangkali kawasa perchance she may be mine.

dan: bongku sumping Dalanjang Bud of the Dalanjang
sabihan nu adi na tell him, the young one,
kuk-ku ginanta kumbong perhaps we are fated to be one
bila nudang janji na if it was decreed to be thus.

lal: umanat niawalihan Message of love I’ll send
pasampayun kakasi may it reach my beloved
langgung pinagbulihan I’ll seek for that union
ginanta balangkali perchance we are fated.

dan: bongku sumping bantali Bud of the Bantali
kannaun dium atoy impress it in his heart
kau-kau ginanta patli perhaps we are fated to be one
maka siintan nakoy union with the precious one.

lal: ya alla tulungan O Allah I seek your help
tulungan do sungga na help thou the lovely flower
minsan sobot langgungun although it is difficult to join
langgungun me tagna na join us as before.
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**Dan:**

minsan pooy akka na
saba na ko sinubid
bong sa ndang kara na
aud na ule lumbid

However clever you may be
be resigned, my dear man,
if you are not my fate
vain is the sought for union.

**Lal:**

ase na humalum na
ningane kabiasa
ni baoy tagna pagum na
tagana sa kawasa

Long ago I did love you
you were my former friend
you were my first love
now I am no longer the master.

**Dan:**

insap no ko kumala
ningkaam kabiasa
saba dem bua-bua
bong do sa na kawasa

Keep this in mind, my dear man,
although you were my acquaintance
you can only be resigned
if you are not my fated master.

**Kalang Nnum (6-verse song)**

**Lal:**

( or dan:)
tinulun kalang mpat
ni dium susa atoy
kaam sa makadalam
papendoy ko mandapat
helum man sa gimatey
agama bangsa Islam

From the lonely heart emerges
the four-verse songs
it's up to you to think
as long as we are alive
you must learn to ponder
the religion of Islam

kalang mpat tinulun
sabihan nu niaku
kumala budiman na
pandapat pahapun
mudi jasa tumimbu
bo sa sasat iman na

Sing the four-verse song
tell me, my precious one,
be of good cheer
so that life may flourish
in you
and your mind
will be at peace

kalang mpat hinantung
by binabasa mapun
pamintangan ni bangsa
lunna-a ko mamintang
kapandoy nulun-nulun
oy-oy tilaw ta

The four-verse song was
sung in the Mapun tongue
a lesson to our people
a lesson to learn from
to create and do
whatever you wish

bilasut pamintangan,
nia gi tanto biat na
lupa gi manakin
bong talangga pantangan
luu gi subahat na
hansu nia takapin

If its precepts you learn not
unsure yet of its teaching
you can yet be excused from caring
if you disobey the commandments
punishment still awaits you
your life will be torn to pieces
nothing will remain.