

LUNSAY: SONG-DANCE OF THE JAMA MAPUN OF SULU

ERIC CASIÑO

IN THE WIDE WATERS BETWEEN BORNEO, PALAWAN, AND Jolo is an oasis of an island known as Cagayan de Sulu.¹ 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 *Dundunay*; 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*

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 starts invariably with the slow movement. The boys first intone a *lunsay* verse like

Pilambuy kadudunan,
pinudji pinubunan.

(Let me describe you,
my maiden friend.)

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

Daa nadu pudji na,
adat na tabati na.

(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 some time, 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 couple are displayed in their finery to the admiring gazes of visitors and relatives. Several times during this night of display, the bride and the groom change their colorful wedding costumes into other brilliant ones for the entertainment 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 organized for special occasions when, for instance, there is a newcomer or visitor 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 rendition 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 recording 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)

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

* "lal" and "dan" refer to "lalla" and "danda" meaning male and female respectively.

- dan: daa kiaka kailu
boho sampay song pitu Ask not, my dear man,
you are but new here.
- lal: pilambuy baransutsi
pinuhunan inidji Let me tease you,
you with the spotless form.
- dan: daa kiaka alat
boho sampay palahat Ask not, you anxious man,
you are new to the place.
- lal: pilambuy tuan-tuan
pinuhunan binustan Let me observe you,
my royal friend.
- dan: daa kiaka dudun
boho sampay pakandang Ask not, my dear man,
you are stranger to the house.
- lal: pilambuy lalitingkat
pinuhunan manlahat Let me take you from this place
you with the graceful gait.
- dan: daa kiaka dudun
boho sampay pamapun Ask not, my dear friend,
you are a newcomer to *Mapun*.
- lal: bong dadi ni dudun na
sinuna bay isun na If it pleases you, my friend,
let us renew our promises.
- dan: sa na dadi intu na
maopakkat balahu na Think no more of them,
our promises are no more.
- lal: bong dadi kaadian
sinuna pagjanjian If it pleases you, my friend,
let us renew the bond of
friendship.
- dan: sa na dadi suna na
maopakkat balasa na Think no more of it,
our promise has been broken.
- lal: bong dadi ni sahabat
sinuna maopakkat If it pleases you, dear friend,
our friendship has since faded.
- dan: daa suna adina
baluba na janji na Ask me no more, my young friend
our friendship has since faded.
- lal: bong dadi na ni iya
maopakkat sinuna If it pleases you,
let me remind you of our love.
- dan: daa suna Calunan
baluba pagisunan Ask me no more, my friend,
our love is now dead and faded.
- lal: bong dadi na ningka-u
maopakkat inintu If it pleases you,
let us rekindle our love.
- dan: daa suna Minu na
maopakkat balahu na Ask me no more, dear man,
our love has now vanished.

- lal: bong dadi na ni malak
maopakkat tinampak If it pleases you, lovely friend,
let the world know of our love.
- dan: daa suna diyang na
maopakkat hilang na Ask me no more, my dear man,
our love is now lost.
- lal: bong dadi na mahambug
maopakkat tinanug If it pleases you, lovely friend,
let all know of our friendship.
- dan: daa suna lubay na
maopakkat lungay na Ask me no more, my friend,
our friendship has been lost.
- lal: bong dadi ni papagan
maopakkat tinanyagan If it pleases you, my friend,
let us proclaim our vows.
- dan: daa suna subid na
maopakkat gaib na Ask me no more, my dear man, '
our vows have been since forgotten.
- lal: bong dadi na ni nandung
maopakkat sinunsung If it pleases you, my dear,
let us realize our promises.
- dan: daan suna mangkis na
maopakkat magkinis na Ask me no more, sweet friend,
they are changed and are no longer.

Kalang Mpat (4-verse songs)

- lal: bana bong bay tagna na
kau kinakasihan
bo biatnaa nia na
me lumut pinandihan It is true once I did love you
but all that now is forgotten
love is gone like dirt
washed clean from the body.
- dan: andu inay talasa
kumala kadudunan
dem buah-bua saba
balubah pagisunan Alas what can we do
my good friend
we can only but be resigned
to promises unfulfilled.
- lal: bana bong bay tagna na
kau ni puadjantung
bo biatnaa nia
me lumut pinastung It is true in days gone by
you were in my heart
now all that is past
carried away like leaves in
a stream.
- dan: kamaduhung ginanta
sa dadi pagidjian
saba dem buah-bua
balubah paganjian It is fate, willed by the gods
let us not quarrel over it
let us accept and be resigned
to promises unfulfilled.
- lal: bagay bongsi tadjunjung
junjung ku man alatan
pinagbulihan langgung
minsan by subahatan 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
daa na upama na
bong luu subahat na
ule langgung maha na
- As we have drifted apart
cease now from your striving
once the bond is broken
reunion is hard and vain.
- lal: bagay bongsi tadjungjung
jungjung ku man usba na
pinagbulihan langgung
kau-kau kadana
- If I may plead with you
let me beg from your elders
let us once again unite
perchance fate had made you mine.
- dan: bila luu niat na
tat-tap na iniakin
pasampay palahat na
balangkali pangantin
- If you have the desire
remember and bear in mind
you must come and visit my place
perchance we may be fated to be one.
- lal: umanat niawalihan
pam-man kadudunan
langgung pinagbulihan
bong luu kampunan
- Message of love I'll send
message to my beloved
if perchance there is a way
to our sought for union.
- dan: sumping salimayu na
sabihan nu niaku
minsan pooy tuyo na
aud na le magjatu
- Flower of *salimayu*
tell what I say
even how much he tries
hard is the sought for union.
- lal: umanat niawalihan
pasampayun kakasi
langgung pinagbulihan
balangkali kawasa
- Message of love I'll send
may it reach her
I'll cease not from striving
perchance she may be mine.
- dan: bongku sumping Dalanjang
sabihan nu adi na
kuk-ku ginanta kumbong
bila nudang janji na
- Bud of the *Dalanjang*
tell him, the young one,
perhaps we are fated to be one
if it was decreed to be thus.
- lal: umanat niawalihan
pasampayun kakasi
langgung pinagbulihan
ginanta balangkali
- Message of love I'll send
may it reach my beloved
I'll seek for that union
perchance we are fated.
- dan: bongku sumping bantali
kannaun dium atoy
kau-kau ginanta patli
maka siintan nakoy
- Bud of the Bantali*
impress it in his heart
perhaps we are fated to be one
union with the precious one.
- lal: ya alla tulungan
tulungan do sungga na
minsan sobot langgungun
langgungun me tagna na
- O Allah I seek your help
help thou the lovely flower
although it is difficult to join
join us as before.

- 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
taggana 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
- 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.