

Dance Literacy within Sholawatan Emprak Mbangkel Yogyakarta

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus our attention to dance literacy as demonstrated by the dancers of Sholawatan Emprak in Mbangkel Yogyakarta; how the transfer of knowledge about Emprak dance took place and how the dancers practiced the knowledge into dancing. Their articulation as well as the observation upon the trainings in October – December 2018 would be the utmost significant ethnographic data of this article in order to extend the pathways of their bodily experiences. Field notes and documentation were also collected during this research. As observed, no one took either a formal study in dance or any private dance courses. They acquired the dance understanding via oral transmission from the leading dancer whom is a 77-year old man whilst the bodily practices were produced from how they imitated the leader. Furthermore, the aesthetic qualities were not so much into their consideration due to undemanding attitude upon a stage performance. Nevertheless, these villagers managed to do regular practices and showcase their ability in doing Emprak dance including in the Yogyakarta Provincial Office of Cultural Affairs. As they stayed unique in their ways learning Emprak dance, they acknowledged themselves that they were dancers. Such phenomenon has, we believe, contributed to the world of dance that dance literacy could be achieved outside the formality as in schools.

1 INTRODUCTION

Dance is multifaceted practice which acquires not only knowledge but also kinesthetic efforts. One has to understand what is being exercised and how to demonstrate it. In addition to that, knowing the dance and then putting it into actions have somewhat taken a process of understanding as well as brought impacts towards the practitioners either individually or socially. Thus, this article seeks to dismantle the literacy that works upon Sholawatan Emprak dancers, not to try to compare that taking dance courses formally in higher education is much better than the autodidact methods as what the Emprak dancers may undertake. Rather, our observation would provide information the ways they receive dance material with its complexity and exhibit their ability. Data collection was conducted in October – December 2018 in forms of direct observing to Sholawatan Emprak rehearsal in Mbangkel Klenggotan, structured interviews with three primary informants and on-site conversations with dance members during rehearsal.

Our article starts with scholarly discussion to frame literacy in dance and how it develops from conventional understanding of literacy. It then

follows to the historical part of Sholawatan Emprak community as the main locus of this research. Empirical features of the Emprak practices will be elaborated in the next part in which knowledge, skill, attitude and value as significant elements upon the engagement of Emprak dancers with dance literacy.

2 SHOLAWATAN EMPRAK IN MBANGKEL, KLENGGOTAN

His name is Adi Winarto, but most people in the neighborhood call him Mbah Adi due his elderly figure of a 77 year-old senior. Mbah Adi shares the history of how the Islamic art community of Sholawatan Emprak was formed (personal communication, 21 October 2018). It was he and Mbah Mitro Hardjono who was his relative who went hand-in-hand upon the request of KH Jadul Maula, the leader of Pondok Pesantren (Islamic cultural school) Kali Opak Klenggotan, to revive Sholawatan Emprak. This Kali Opak Emprak group then made their first performance in Chinese Lunar Festival in 2011-2012 after 15 years being non active. Jadul Maula himself, since then, committed to accommodate the Emprak's regular practice and seek

for places to stage the Emprak either in Yogyakarta or out of town.

Besides holding a membership of Sholawatan Emprak Kali Opak, Mbah Adi also revived the Sholawatan Emprak in Mbangkel Village in October 2017. It is situated just less than a kilometer from Kali Opak Emprak group location to the north. This Mbangkel troop consists of men and women, elders and young children unlike the other Emprak group whose active members are men coming from different villages. They rehearse once in two weeks every wednesday night at 8 – 10.30 PM. It was said that until December 2018, they have demonstrated at least ten performances including in the Yogyakarta Provincial Office of Cultural Affairs. Promoted as a cultural asset, this community has received fund from the Office to run the group. In return, the group has to consistently rehearse that it should make a report in forms of rehearsal attendance papers.

Sholawatan Emprak is an Islam-influenced art work that displays Islamic symbolism through its artistic elements and religious messages. Accompanied by a musical ensemble with a combination of Javanese and Middle Eastern instruments, the group performs dance, vocal, singing, narrative reading within Javanese melodious rhythm. The language articulated in the singing as well as the narratives covers Javanese and Arabic. The original term sholawat means the practice of delivering prayers to worship the Muslim's God Allah SWT and praise the Prophet Muhammad. Artistic attributes are added to this religious practice and further develops into sholawatan art practice whose lyrics also describe stories of the Prophet's birth and His attempts to stand for Islam. When the Sholawatan Emprak first appeared remains mysterious. No one could give the exact date or year, only assumptions are left open. The Emprak members note that it has been inherited since hundred years ago. But, a more scientific investigation comes into view from Jadul Maula as he traced several sholawatan groups in and outside Yogyakarta. He assumes it emerged possibly dating back to the era of Demak, the Muslim Kingdom (1475–1554) and widely developed in the era of Sultan Agung of Mataram Muslim Kingdom (1613–1645).

There is no single exact definition of the meaning of Emprak. Jadul Maula presumably mentions two meanings; (1) comes from the word nglemprak in Javanese language which means to sit cross-legged, and, (2) from Sundanese language that means clapping the hands. However, the word Emprak specifically refers to the dance, neither music nor song. Before, the dancers only sat cross-legged and

moved the body to the right and left following the rhythm or ngleyek. They stood up almost at the end part when the leader in louder voice uttered in question, "Ayo diemprakke!", literally means "Shall we make it emprak" (personal communication, 6 June 2018). Today, within the dance practices, more body motions are found. Of course this would not have happened without the intervention of individuals who possessed knowledge in dance.

The Emprak Mbangkel embraces thirty members in their active participation. Varying in occupations, mostly they work in private sectors. This becomes a reason why the trainings are organized at night, begun around 8 PM and ended at 11 PM, as below stated by Bibit, the group leader (communication, 29 November 2018)

Interviewer: The training is never done during day time, is it?

Bibit: No. Most of us are workers in private sectors so we work until late afternoon. It's only night time to be able to rehearse.

Interviewer: What kind of professions do most members have?

Bibit: Nobody serves as civil servants. Everyone is from lower economical class. They are farmers, factory labors, construction workers and grass finders.

Sayekti, a female dancer of Emprak adds among all there are eight women whom are housewives and two young elementary school girls (communication, 29 November 2018). Bibit also mentions among the members there are new residents, those who were not raised in Mbangkel village, but moved in and joined Emprak group due to a reason of continuing their past art connection to hadroh, an Islamic musical ensemble also in form of sholawatan to fulfill the thirst of doing Islamic art.

3 DANCE LITERACY IN SHOLAWATAN EMPRAK: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Dance involves art creation and experience. Dance also reinforces the very individual expression and characteristic. Georgina Barton (2014) suggests that individuals are said to be literate in arts is when they have perceptive as well as self awareness in the discourse of arts. This embraces the ideas of factors that contribute to the art making, means and media to perform with, the techniques in demonstrating arts, and responsiveness towards cultural and social praxis

that surround the working arts. As mentioned in the beginning dance requires not only body parts that move or mechanical dexterity, but also knowledge that is informed either from one who transfers the information or through independent learning to support the dance ability. Further, meaning making upon the dance will be produced to make a sense of why doing the dance. Here, the so-called literacy or being literate that conventionally demonstrates speaking, reading, writing, and listening has broadly developed. A medium with its elements is utilized to produce or exhibit a practice. This medium encompasses specific significances in which prior understanding towards the medium itself may also mean that one is literate either on the medium or on practice being presented (Kassing, 2014). In terms of dance, dance is a medium that has explanatory findings on its meanings, functions, structure, and messages. Additionally, the practice of doing the dance extends the elements of physical roles, methods, techniques, and supporting components. Thus, the experience gives sensation towards the practitioners in which from the experience they are motivated to learn even more, evaluate the results, and encouraged to be creative.

The presentation of dance embraces a variety of complex elements which form a dance and the dance for stage performance. Not only the body movement, one has to understand choreography, music, theatre or drama, story, and terms found in dance. Dance is to be exercised, performed and watched. Thus, an audience becomes vital in receiving the messages informed by the dance. In order to understand the dance-related variables, the methods vary depending on how one would want to achieve. The art education may be taken in formal schools, private dance courses, dance learning communities, and autodidact with the use of technology as medium to display and the practitioner will follow and imitate. Yet, watching dances from one stage to another stage can also be a method as direct observation gives audio visual presentation that could inspire besides making open communication with artists for idea exchanges.

However, the dance learning done by Emprak members is unique. No member takes formal dance school. The oral tradition of transmitting and receiving the knowledge is the learning ways. Following and imitating are also modes of learning the dance movement. In other words, information based on individual's experiences is historically passed down and circulated. Accordingly what one has retrieved is what to share. As the dancers consume the materials from the instructor, they reproduce the materials and interpret them on

individual basis. This means, the actual presentation of each dancer can be different from other dancers. Besides their background as well as dance knowledge, this section will discuss the learning of Sholawatan Emprak upon the dancers covering knowledge, skill, attitude and value.

3.1 Knowledge

Earlier we have mentioned that oral tradition became the very method of transferring the knowledge product of Sholawatan Emprak. Mbah Adi shares to the members on the historical account of Emprak even though he forgets some details concerning time of events and the depicted stories. He received information orally from the elders or *sesepuh* who raised the Emprak group. Widely known in 1945, Emprak already existed before he was born in 1941. At the age of 24, he learned Emprak from the *sesepuh* after 1965. He claims that the passing of the *sesepuh* did not cut the ties of Emprak continuation because he represented the young generation in that time. Thus, anytime needed there are at least two persons who could be living sources, he and Mbah Mitra Hardjono although the latter was considered *sesepuh*. Hence, what he has shared is able as much as necessary to give understanding upon the members about what Sholawatan Emprak is.

With Mbah Mitro Hardjono (passed away in 2018), Mbah Adi gave trainings of Sholawatan Emprak covering music, vocal, singing, narrative, and dancing. He references the foundation of Sholawatan Emprak to a manuscript namely *Buku Emprak* or the *Book of Emprak*. It is expressed in Javanese Arabic or Arab *gundul* containing Javanese-meaning narration but written in Arabic script without specific signs of vowels in the written script. Mbah Adi continued, a *sesepuh* brought the *Buku Emprak* to Pondok Pesantren Kali Opak, because that *sesepuh* could not read the Arab *gundul*. In fact, the book was not the original version, but re-written version. Below figures are also the re-written pieces of the book comprising narratives and song lyrics. Mbah Adi then asked assistance from a *santri* (student) from East Java who resides in Mbangkel to transliterate the writings. He re-wrote the Arabic writings word-by-word and gave the literal meaning in Javanese below the Arabic words as seen in figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 illustrates *rawen*, the recited narratives, which inform the stories of the Prophet while figure 2 presents a song. The red color indicates two significances; (1) emphasizing on important messages, and, (2) songs, given thick lines above and below the lyrics or within tables. Not long after the

transliterated version was done, Mbah Adi used it to teach Sholawatan Emprak to Mbangkel people. And the source book was then given to Pak Ngadilan, also from Mbangkel, for safekeeping purpose.

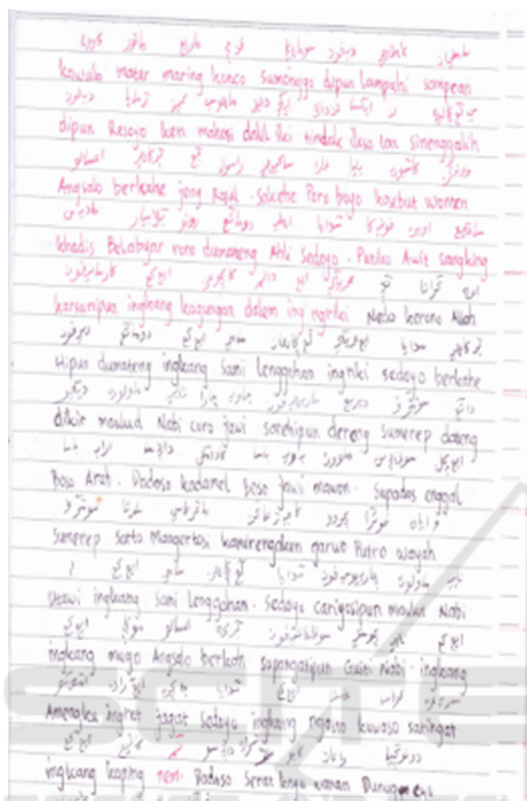


Figure 1: Opening remarks of rawen (Adi Winarto's document).

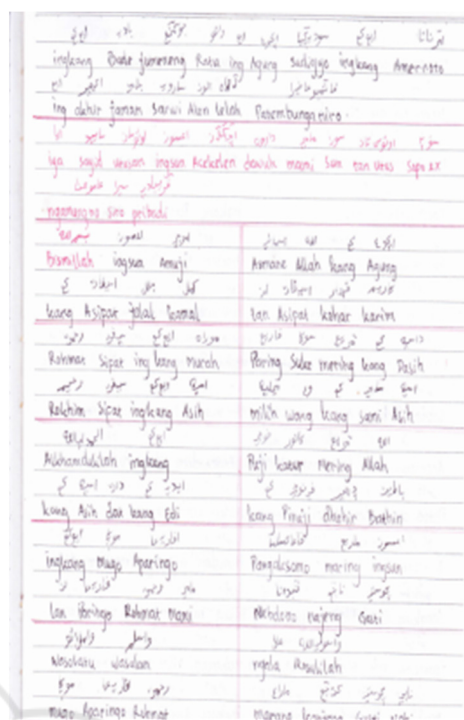


Figure 2: The first song of Ya Sayyid (Adi Winarto's document).

The presence of the Buku Emprak indicates the real existence of Sholawatan Emprak as well as expresses more appropriateness towards this Islamic art work including those who perform it. Furthermore, it generates the cultural movement of Mbangkel villagers in presenting the Muslim cultural practice notifying that the works of Islam and the works of aesthetics can get along in the ways the Mbangkel Muslims experience the living tradition. Serving as evidence, this book is available for those who wish to learn about Sholawatan Emprak and stimulates individuals to finally join the group. Sayekti read several parts of the book and became aware of the very existence of Emprak as she stated (communication, 29 November 2019),

Interviewer: Did you read it all?
 Sayekti: No, just some parts. I felt more confident that I knew Emprak was really Islamic.
 Interviewer: How does it affect you?
 Sayekti: I felt more Islamic and Muslim. I thought it was only a made-up practice. Interviewer: Did you think that way?
 Sayekti: Yes, I did. After reading the book I thought, "Oh this is real." Before, I was thinking that Emprak was nothing.

The complete contents in the book encompass not only the narrated narratives of the Prophet's life stories, but also song lyrics. Nevertheless, most members do not read the entire contents, only song lyrics that are compiled, copied and shared to musicians and singers. It is the dalang or puppeteer who reads the narratives during trainings and performances. This makes the understanding upon the whole writings less thorough, just small pieces. Conversely, Bibit the dalang, admits that he spent two months to read and learn the book contents. He also took out the narratives and re-wrote them orderly. By doing it, he does not need to bring the thick book, but instead some sheets of papers. Indeed, some narratives are successfully memorized so he is not bothered with papers.

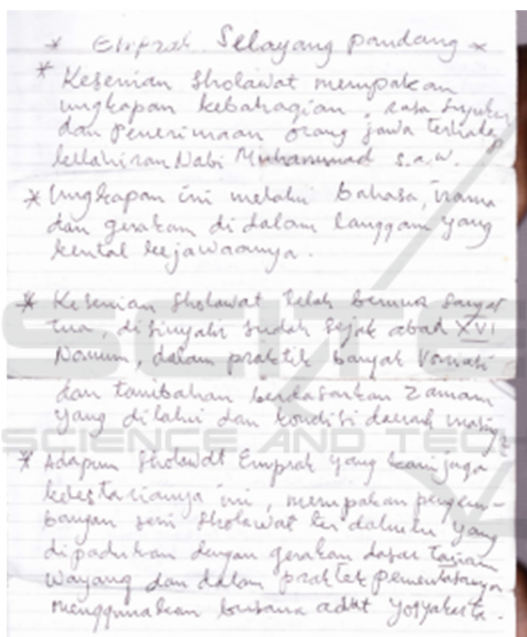


Figure 3: Emprak Selayang Pandang (Bibit's document).

Since all remarks are written and pronounced in Javanese and Arabic, there are concerns in understanding Sholawatan Emprak. It is therefore Jadul Maula made a narration in Indonesian language containing a brief explanation about what Sholawatan Emprak is upon the request of Bibit. Bibit perceives it as an academic narration namely Emprak Selayang Pandang (Emprak at a Glance) (see figure 3) in anticipation of academic questions about Sholawatan Emprak (communication, 29 November 2018).

Different from the musicians, the Emprak dancers do not need to read because they have different practice. But this does not mean they do not possess any knowledge. If the dance is read as a physical text, then the dancers do the movements by reading the

movements shown by the leader who sits in front, and imitate. They follow the bodily movements and gradually memorize them. Mbah Adi uses codification in teaching and transmitting the moves through songs. There are seven songs added with long narratives or rawen before each song for a full night Sholawatan Emprak performance. He gives codes of the very beginning of the songs, one or two words in the lyrics, to signify the kind of movement, for examples, Iya sayyid...., Asum sallam, Montro montro...., He Allah kang..., Rohmating yang..., Alon-alon..., Hei sah kito... But within contemporary Muslim society, the performance is condensed into fifteen to thirty minutes. Thus, the group has to craft a condensed-style by reducing the songs as well as condensing the narratives. Usually for one condensed-style performance, the group presents opening prolog explaining about Sholawatan Emprak, reciting short narratives, and singing three songs. For this, the first song which is Iya Sayyid is compulsory to be performed whilst the other two songs can be varied. It is because, as articulated by Mbah Adi, Iya Sayyid song which is started with Salallahu'allaihi. It contains the story of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and that He would be the last prophet who would put things in order based on Islam and give guidance by the end of days (communication, 29 November 2018).

To some extent, dances generate manifestations of religious faiths and practices even though at the same time artistic showcase is also at works (Descutner, 2010) The knowledge obtained from the learning and Sholawatan Emprak also communicates about what kind of Islam that exists in Yogyakarta context. Mbah Adi, Sayekti and Bibit define Islam that they experience is Islam Jawa or Javanese Islam. And the Sholawatan Emprak as expressed in mixed compositions of Javanese elements and Arab elements are found either in manuscript and art works. In addition to that, the Emprak members are aware of the function of this Emprak that is to do dakwah or disseminating Islamic principles. Besides glorifying God Allah SWT and praising the Prophet, the lyrics also encompass the encouragement to exercise Islamic principles. By having such knowledge, the members are prepared when being asked about what actually they are doing.

3.2 Skill

The whereabouts of dance performed in Sholawatan Emprak is inspired from the movements of wayang wong of Yogyakarta tradition. Wayang means puppets and wong means human; it is a

transformation of leather puppet show in the forms of dance drama in which real humans play the puppet characters. It was Mbah Mitro who had introduced the wayang wong featured-body moves to the group. As said previously the dancers only sat cross-legged and did *ngleyek* move and exhibited monotonous presentations. In order to give more dynamic dance demonstration, Mbah Mitro transmitted several dance movements to add the artistic qualities of *Emprak*. Why wayang wong? Mbah Adi shared that Mbah Mitro was once a wayang wong lover and often watched the trainings in Taman Siswa School Complex, Yogyakarta. From his intensive observing, he was capable to grasp the wayang stories of Mahabharata epic, recognize the diverse characters and understand the different movements among characters both strong and refined ones. Also, he listened and learned the musical elements for describing the characters.

As wayang wong is categorized as classical piece, dance movements demonstrated are given terms and meanings, stylized and distilled within manipulative bodily motion (Soedarsono & Narawati: 2014). However, in *Emprak*, the mastering of terms and correct techniques are not so much applied due to the absence of formal learning. This includes the deficiency of female-male-dance-motion knowledge. All dance moves that Mbah Adi teaches are demonstrating male characters. Not a single move signifies female movement. Most characterizations he mentions and exemplifies are male figures such as Pandawa the five brothers of Mahabharata epic, strong characters in general and the clowns of Punokawan. The Pandawas are considered refined characters; this requires *lentreh* movement while the strong characters are given the moves *brasak-brasak*. What makes them different is the level of lifting the arms and the dynamic of torso moves. Refined elements need lower arm lift than the strong ones; higher in level or parallel with the shoulder. *Lumaksana* or the walk is also for male character. Thus, the female dancers have to follow all these male motion. More importantly, they do not mind but enjoy following and imitating the moves as long as they could see what the front dancers do in moving. And all the dancers have to pay attention to the sitting arrangements that they see themselves how much they are able to memorize the moves. For a dancer whom is considered dancing better than the others technically speaking, will take front position, behind Mbah Adi.

In the rehearsal we attended (19 December 2018), there were twenty four people in attendance; one person recited the narratives, five male members

played instruments, seven men and one woman joined the singing group, three men and seven women danced. Mbah Adi came late so that one female dancer took the lead and sat in front, while the others followed her. When Mbah Adi came, automatically they re-set their positions and gave the front area to Mbah Adi. The uniformity of the dance moves however cannot be maintained in terms of the techniques due to the differences upon individuals' interpretation. Of course Mbah Adi comes forward as the dance leader, taking the very front position so that the rest of the dancers could follow and imitate his moves. And he himself depends on how much he could remember the structure of the moves, for an instance, how high one can lift the arm for a move or how low one extends the arm for certain song. Mbah Adi recognizes the song orders and listened primarily to *kendang* or drum to produce the next moves. However, during the dance, sometimes he feels that he is not in the position to give signs to the drummer when he finds mistakes in the drum sounds and beats. He has a long experience of playing drums in which through his ability he could observe the faults or off-beats the drummer makes.

That nobody ever took any dance courses or studied dance in schools is one factor found in common among the *Emprak* members. In fact, dancing or moving the body does require integrated moves of all parts of the body, from head to toes externally and internally. A dancer in her sitting pose cross-legged without making arm moves may not seem doing dance, but the pose itself is the dance move as it is supported with the torso held upright, legs and arms in certain position though not moving, internal muscles tightened, and message or idea contained within. Thus, the *Emprak* members learn how to sit, move arms and legs, move head and shoulder, shift the torso and use the shawl as a dance property. Further, they have to learn when to begin and finish whilst listening to the music.

Mbah Adi and Bibit care less about the perfection of the moves that should be demonstrated. Instead, what they emphasize is that the dancers are able to follow the leader and maintain the uniformity of moving by looking at other dancers sitting in front or right side and left side. For female dancers, they do not sit cross-legged, but sit *simpuh*, both legs are bent in for both thighs bear the body weight like pads. It is not because of the tight sarong the female dancers wear, rather, it is because of cultural appropriateness and politeness upon Javanese women. This shows how much gap is created between seeing and doing. See the moves being demonstrated and follow but the mechanical practice show the distinctive results.

Nonetheless, such diverse understandings as well as demonstrations give no halt in continuing the dance because rigid evaluation is not undertaken. Instead, active social participation in this Sholawatan Emprak community that works most among them.

3.3 Attitude

Attitude does matter in literacy particularly it contributes to shape individuals how they position in the environment and how they attempt in making social participation. Why is it important? It is because of the collective goals that need to be achieved may overlapped with their personal aims. That some Mbangkel villagers join Sholawatan Emprak group means they enter a zone with certain motivation and conditions. Not to forget to mention that they also attain a new identity as an Emprak member.

Holding a membership of Emprak and performing a cultural practice with aesthetic attributes give impacts that are able to cause changes. Based on field observation and some conversations with the members, some points of attitude have featured from the group's qualities. (1) Having determination; Mbah Adi, Sayekti, and Bibit are in agreement that having determination is understood that once one makes a decision then s/he will be responsible of committing the consequences. Preserving Emprak culture, actively attending the rehearsals, willing to perform and maintaining the communal social interaction are of this attitude element. (2) Willing to be in unstable lifestyle; this means extra time, energy even monetary collection possibly contributed to the group outside personal and family affairs. (3) Keeping self control and self confidence at trainings and performances; it is a group work so everyone will work together for the success of the performance. (4) Regarding other musicians, singers and dancers as friends; it is vital to befriend with all members not considering them as competitors. (5) Having the integrity to be happy; the happy feeling will affect the harmonious as well as collaborative works among members. (6) Dealing with pain caused while performing; this relates with the utilization of the body parts in doing dance that may hurt such as sitting for quite some time that causes fallen legs, torso should be kept upright, and dealing with sharp pins as costume elements for female dancers.

3.4 Values

Values in literacy that this article discusses refer to the importances of being part of Sholawatan Emprak community. First to be mentioned is that the members

become consciously aware about this religious art work; the forms of the art practice and how it functions in the contexts of Muslim religiosity and Javanese culture preservation. Developing Ann Dils's (2007) statements over values in dance literacy, it relates to: (1) individual physical practices; the practitioners have to obey the disciplinary body conducts when dancing. Moving the head and neck, arms, legs, and the body torso at the same time needs multifaceted coordination among those body parts. Also, the complex movements of each section or song are not merely daily practices, but, those become extraordinary yet challenging in doing due to the regulated body motion. Moreover, the dance moves are not classified by gender, but both female and male dancers do the same moves even though the moves can be categorized as male motion except for sitting positions; (2) creativity; the dance stimulates creative ideas as aesthetic elements are not static in nature. Instead, it is dynamic that the practitioners have the chances to develop preferences, for instances making condensed-style performance, costume features, and position arrangements; (3) intellectual accomplishment; this concerns goals that are successfully achieved and the preparation made to pursue the goals. Also the exercise of knowledge, skill, and attitude has generated the results what literacy has meant; (4) improved problem solving skills; some Mbangkel villagers gathering in an organization, this means issue are potential to arise and they are encouraged to take parts to elucidate. Bibit was happy to host the rehearsals, but then he found it problematic that he had to provide logistics for the members. Today, the rehearsals are carried out in rotation scheme and the cost for logistics is collected through arisan system or money circulation that is contributed by each member before they begin to rehearse; and (5) societal engagement through conversations and interaction; the gatherings of regular trainings or performances have promoted more ideas to exchange among members in which such interaction has in due course promoted people-to-people engagement as well as community commitment.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To begin this article, we depart from the dance acquisition that is achieved by the dance members of Sholawatan Emprak Mbangkel. As a complex practice, dance complicates elements upon practitioners in order to present the dance in which ones have to have both knowledge and skill.

Nevertheless, being in a dance-music community with Islamic symbolism has encouraged them in learning the dancing without the provision of either professional dance instructors or formal study modality. Thus, the dance literacy is somewhat self-taught as in the dance movement. Of course, challenges come in their ways one member has become the lead, but he did not attain any particular dance courses as well. However, the Sholawatan Emprak does present an art form that has structure, choreography, message, idea, theme, and music in which through the practices they gain experiences. Accordingly, the dance members achieved what it is called dance literacy.

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