

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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*

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 mahambung  
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  
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.