

Analysis of Representation of Nature and its Meaning in the *Asyik* Dance through Aristotle's Theory of Mimesis

Ratna Fazlinda Jelly^{1*}, Amsalib Pisali², Tengku Fauzan Tengku Anuar³, Sharifuddin Zainal⁴, Ismaliza Ishak⁴, Adinda Usin Muka⁵

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Department of Heritage Studies, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia,

² Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia,

³ Department of Creative Technology, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia

⁴ Creative Arts Program, Academy of Arts & Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia,

⁵ Indonesia Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Mulawarman University, Samarinda, East Kalimantan, Indonesia.

fazlinda.aj@umk.edu.my, amsalib@fmsp.upsi.edu.my, tengkufauzan@umk.edu.my, sharifuddin@ums.edu.my, ismaliza@ums.edu.my, adindausinmuka@unukaltim.ac.id
Tel: +60 17 816 6772

Abstract

The *Tarian Asyik*, a royal dance from Kelantan originating in the Pattani Kingdom of Southern Thailand, was created by Raja Kuning, the Queen of Pattani, to express longing for a lost bird. Beyond court entertainment, the *Asyik* Dance represents nature through graceful movements, symbolic imagery, and harmony with the natural world. This study examines these representations by analysing three motifs—the bird, ocean waves, and elephant—through Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*, which interprets art as the imitation of life. The findings reveal that *Tarian Asyik* embodies aesthetic beauty, philosophical meaning, and the Malay worldview.

Keywords: *Asyik* dance; representation of nature; Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*

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1.0 Introduction

Nature and humanity maintain a symbiotic relationship: humans rely on nature for survival, and nature depends on human stewardship for preservation and continuity. In art and culture, nature serves as a persistent source of inspiration, shaping creative ideas and artistic expression. This process is conceptually framed by *mimesis*, a philosophical concept introduced by Aristotle, which defines art as the representation or imitation of life and nature through structured human actions and experiences. In the Malaysian cultural context, numerous traditional dance forms embody elements derived from the natural environment. These include *Tarian Sumazau* and *Kuda Pacu* from Sabah, *Tarian Rejang Beuh* and *Ngajat* from Sarawak, *Tarian Pelanduk* from Pahang, and *Tarian Asyik* from Kelantan. Each

of these performances reflects a close relationship between movement, symbolism, and the surrounding ecological or social environment.

Tarian Asyik is a classical Malay court dance believed to have originated from the Patani Sultanate during the reign of Raja Kuning (1635–1649), prior to the fall of Patani in 1688, as recorded in *Hikayat Patani*. It was later introduced to the Kelantan court around 1844 during the reign of Sultan Muhammad II (1839–1886) (Malek: 2006). The dance narrates the story of Raja Kuning, the Queen of Patani, who mourns the loss of her cherished dove. The performance expresses her longing and affection through soft, graceful movements, captivating audiences with its refined aesthetics. The term *Asyik*, which means “beloved” or “passionate,” aptly captures the emotional and aesthetic essence of the dance. According to Sheppard (1983), the *Asyik* was danced in the inner private hall in the palace, and the role of the leading *Asyik* dancer (*Puteri Asyik*) was a much-coveted position.

Tarian Asyik features a range of movement motifs (*ragam*), such as *merpati terbang*, *tanduk kerbau*, *mengambur*, *sasang*, *ketam melambai duyung*, *setukang benang*, *gedik itik*, *itik berenang*, *gajah gulung belalai*, and *gelombang*. Each motif represents specific aspects of nature and human emotion. This study examines three motifs—*merpati terbang* (the bird), *gelombang* (the wave), and *gajah gulung belalai* (the elephant)—as symbolic representations of the natural world. The analysis applies Aristotle’s Theory of *Mimesis* to investigate how these motifs express the relationship between movement, nature, and meaning in *Tarian Asyik*. This approach aims to demonstrate that *Tarian Asyik* embodies natural representation as creative transformation, reflecting cultural values, aesthetic sensibilities, and human engagement with nature.

2.0 Literature Review

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) was born in Stagira, Thrace, and is widely regarded as the intellectual successor to Plato, though he diverged significantly from his teacher’s views. This divergence led to the emergence of new philosophical ideas that profoundly influenced Western thought (Sustrisno & Hadiman, 1992). Aristotle is often credited as the pioneer of the concept of *detached aesthetics*—the notion of “art for art’s sake.” Both Plato and Aristotle viewed art as a form of imitation, reflecting nature, life, and reality. However, their interpretations of imitation differed considerably. While Plato regarded artistic imitation as an inferior and deceptive copy of the ideal world, Aristotle saw it as a meaningful process through which knowledge and understanding of the real world could be achieved. For Plato, true knowledge derived from intellectual contemplation of perfect forms rather than sensory experience, whereas Aristotle argued that abstract patterns and physical reality were inseparable; observation and representation of the physical world served as legitimate sources of knowledge.

The term *mimesis* originates from the Greek word meaning “imitation,” but its semantic range extends to “representation,” “reproduction,” “expression,” “fiction,” and “make-believe” (Woodruff, 1992). It refers to the creation of *mimemata*—representations or images that reflect aspects of life and nature. In Plato’s work, he used *mimesis* to describe a fundamental human impulse to create and to find pleasure in representation, acknowledging art’s cognitive and emotional dimensions. Despite its extensive application, Aristotle’s notion of *mimesis* remains fluid, existing within a conceptual field that encompasses likeness, signification, and transformation rather than mere imitation.

According to Halliwell (2012), Aristotle’s conception of *mimesis* extends beyond the analytical classification of artistic forms to encompass the interpretive flexibility inherent in all creative acts. Instead of imposing a rigid aesthetic system, Aristotle’s *mimetic* theory accommodates variations in artistic interpretation, allowing for multiple layers of meaning and diverse modes of representation. Within this view, *mimesis* is not merely the act of copying reality but a transformative process through which art reimagines, reframes, and communicates human experience.

In his seminal work *Poetics*, Aristotle categorised the arts under what he termed “the mimetic arts,” analysing them based on their medium, objects, and manner of imitation. This framework provides the foundation for understanding how artistic expressions—whether through poetry, theatre, or dance—serve as structured reflections of human life and action. In this study, Aristotle’s theory of *mimesis* functions as the central analytical lens to interpret how selected movement motifs (*ragam*) in *Asyik* dance embody representations of nature and emotion through stylised imitation.

Sheppard (1983), some of the movements, in which fingers, hands, and arms dominated, represented doves rising into the air, deer bounding through the forest, the ebb of the waves, and imitated the day-to-day occupation of a girl in the palace as well. This statement is supported by Asmad (1990), who noted that the dance form desired by the queen was intended to imitate the movements and habits of her beloved bird. The history of the establishment of the *Asyik* dance dates back to prehistoric times, originating as a form of dance that directly imitates the movements of nature (Hanafi, H, Laila, N.A.M., Mohd Saman, W.S.W. & Hussin, N.: 2018).

3.0 Methodology

The primary data for this study were obtained from selected video recordings of *Tarian Asyik*. These recordings were chosen for their clarity in illustrating the defining movement motifs and stylistic features of the dance. Each recording was examined to identify the structural composition, rhythmic phrasing, and gestural vocabulary characteristic of the *Asyik* tradition. In addition to the visual analysis, relevant secondary sources—such as published literature, historical documents, and archival materials—were reviewed to provide cultural and historical context supporting the interpretation of the movements.

Video observation is suitable for studying mimetic expression as it enables close analysis of movement, gesture, and symbolism in dance. By reviewing recorded performances, researchers can interpret subtle details such as rhythm, spatial relations, and expressive

intent. A qualitative approach is preferred because it focuses on meaning rather than measurement, allowing deeper exploration of aesthetic, emotional, and cultural dimensions. This method reveals how imitation in Asyik dance reflects artistic creativity, historical context, and philosophical understanding of human expression.

The analysis was guided by Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*, which conceptualises art as the imitation of human actions and lived experiences through an organised narrative or formal structure. In this context, *mimesis* is understood as the process of imitation that reproduces gestures, expressions, and movements to convey emotional and symbolic meaning. This research employed a qualitative approach combining a library-based study and analytical observation of existing performance recordings to explore how natural elements and symbolic gestures are represented in *Tarian Asyik* through mimetic expression.

4.0 Findings

Asyik dance is performed exclusively by female dancers seated close to the floor, emphasizing the connection between the body and the ground. The choreography highlights refined movements of the torso, hands, and fingers, reflecting the dance's courtly aesthetics. The subsequent analysis examines three primary motifs—the bird, the wave, and the elephant—each representing specific meanings and cultural expressions within *Tarian Asyik*.

4.1 The Influence of the Patani Queen on the Origin of Asyik Dance

Asyik dance is rooted in the cultural and historical legacy of the Patani Sultanate, particularly during the reign of the four Patani Queens (1584–1688). Queen Raja Kuning significantly influenced the symbolic and emotional foundation of the dance. The legend of her longing for a lost dove inspired the creation of *Asyik* dance, which expresses sorrow and spiritual affection through delicate movements and lyrical gestures. The term *Asyik*, meaning “beloved” or “one who is in deep affection,” encapsulates the connection between emotional expression, feminine grace, and royal refinement.

Asyik dance, performed exclusively by female dancers seated near the ground, emphasizes gentleness, restraint, and harmony with nature. These qualities reflect the aesthetic ideals of the royal court and the feminine character of the performance. The dancers' proximity to the floor symbolizes humility and the rootedness of human life in the natural world. Motifs inspired by birds, waves, and elephants further illustrate the connection between nature and femininity.

The bird symbolizes freedom, longing, and beauty. The wave signifies rhythm, emotional flow, and continuity. The elephant represents wisdom, strength, and loyalty. Together, these qualities reflect the aesthetic ideals of the royal court and the feminine character of the performance. *Asyik* dance thus serves as both a reflection of royal history and a cultural text that celebrates femininity, empathy, and the harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

4.2 The Representation of Bird

The movement known as *ragam merpati terbang* (the flying dove), depicted in Figure 1, is a mimetic imitation inspired by Raja Kuning's lost bird. This gesture exemplifies Aristotle's concept of *mimesis*, where art imitates nature and human experience as emotional recreation rather than simple replication. The dancer leans gently to the left or right, with both palms facing upward, emulating the fluttering motion of a bird in flight. This embodied imitation transforms the queen's longing and sorrow into a symbolic and aesthetic form.



Fig. 1: *Merpati Terbang*
(Source: Authors)

In semiotic performance analysis, the dove serves as a signifier of peace, love, and freedom. The rhythmic oscillation of the dancers' movements symbolizes harmony among body, emotion, and nature. When twelve *Asyik* dancers perform together as Raja Kuning recalls her lost bird, the communal aspect of emotional expression is emphasized, indicating that grief and affection are shared human experiences elevated through ritual performance.

The term *Asyik*, meaning “beloved” in Malay, deepens the metaphorical significance of the dance by connecting the queen's affection for her bird to broader concepts of devotion, purity, and transcendence. *Asyik* dance thus operates as both a mimetic and semiotic embodiment of human emotion expressed through natural imagery. The bird becomes a poetic intermediary between internal emotion and the external world, consistent with Aristotle's view that art transforms experience into beauty and meaning.

4.3 The Representation of a Wave



Fig. 2.(a) *Gelombang duduk*; (b) *Gelombang berdiri*
(Source: Authors)

Figure 2(a), *gelombang duduk* (seated wave), and (b), *gelombang berdiri* (standing wave), demonstrate dancers' graceful arm movements that imitate the undulating motion of sea waves. In *gelombang duduk*, the dancer releases her scarf while performing soft, seated gestures. In *gelombang berdiri*, the dancer transitions from kneeling to standing, creating a continuous, flowing rhythm that mirrors the rise and fall of ocean waves. Both patterns function as mimetic representations of the sea, illustrating Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* as the imitation of nature's rhythm and essence through artistic expression.

From a geographical perspective, both Kelantan and Siam (Patani) are coastal regions positioned strategically between the Burmese and Annamese kingdoms, within the historical Indo-Chinese realm under French influence. Their geographical proximity to the sea has long shaped their cultural identity and aesthetic sensibilities. According to John Nieuhoff's account during his visit to Patani in 1600, under the reign of Raja Kuning, the kingdom prospered as a major maritime trading hub for voyages to the Far East (Mohd Zamberi, 2006). This historical context suggests that the coastal environment, with its constant interaction between land and sea, inspired the creation of the *gelombang duduk* and *gelombang berdiri* motifs—movements that reflect both the serenity and the dynamism of the ocean.

Davies (1902) also documented a significant event in 1899 following the death of Sultan Mansur, when the reigning Rajah of Kelantan, fearing political unrest, sought assistance from Siam. The Siamese government responded by sending troops and a gunboat via the sea, underscoring the importance of maritime routes as the main channel for communication, transportation, and governance. Although the political disturbance was later resolved peacefully, this episode highlights how the sea symbolized both connection and instability—an ever-shifting force mirrored in the fluid movements of *Asyik* dance.

These gestures do not simply replicate the physical movement of waves; instead, they reinterpret the motion as an aesthetic metaphor for emotional continuity, transition, and resilience. The dancers' subtle swaying and undulating arm movements express harmony and equilibrium, embodying the philosophical unity of human emotion, nature's rhythm, and the Malay court's cultural worldview. The wave motif in *Tarian Asyik* thus exemplifies Aristotle's idea that art imitates life as a reimagined reflection of nature's beauty and wisdom.

4.4 The Representation of an Elephant

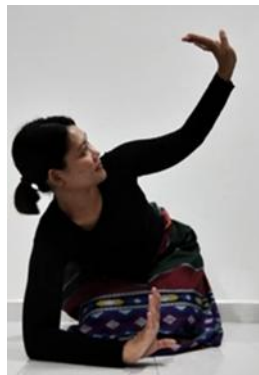


Fig. 3: *Gajah lambung belalai*
(Source: Authors)

In Figure 3, the dancers' hand movements resemble an elephant raising and curling its trunk, serving as a mimetic imitation that captures both the animal's physical form and symbolic significance. In *Tarian Asyik*, this motif represents power and dignity, aligning with Aristotle's notion of *mimesis*, where art imitates life in essence and meaning. The dancer's controlled, rhythmic motions evoke the elephant's grace, patience, and composure, transforming natural movement into an aesthetic expression of human virtue and cultural philosophy.

In Southeast Asian cultural consciousness, particularly within Thai and Malay traditions, the elephant occupies a revered position as a national and spiritual symbol. In Thai belief, the white elephant (*chang phueak*) is considered sacred—an embodiment of royal authority, divine wisdom, and moral virtue. During the Ayutthaya and Sukhothai periods, elephants symbolised sovereignty and were used in warfare and royal ceremonies as emblems of majesty and courage. Similarly, in Kelantan, elephants were regarded as royal beasts that featured prominently in state ceremonies and processions, symbolising nobility and royal power.

Beyond its symbolic association with strength and sovereignty, the elephant in *the Asyik* dance also represents diplomacy and unity between neighbouring kingdoms. Historical accounts by Davies (1902) document the long-standing ties between Patani, Kelantan, and Siam, maintained through the ritual offering of *Bunga Mas* (Golden Flowers) — a gesture of respect and peaceful allegiance to the King of Siam. Even during periods of conflict and displacement, the relationship evolved into one marked by resilience, negotiation, and cultural exchange.

Viewed from this perspective, the elephant-inspired movements in *Asyik* dance transcend physical imitation and embody political harmony, endurance, and moral equilibrium. These gestures represent strength balanced by serenity and authority guided by compassion. The motif demonstrates how traditional Malay court dance integrates natural symbolism and historical experience into a poetic reflection of human virtue, royal identity, and the balance between power and empathy.

5.0 Discussion

This study critically addresses a key research gap in the discourse on traditional Malay dance, where the philosophical foundation of Aristotelian mimesis has rarely been applied to examine courtly forms such as the *Asyik* dance. Previous scholarship has predominantly emphasised aesthetic form, movement style, and ritual context, often neglecting the interpretive dimension of representation and symbolism. Through an analysis of mimetic motifs—particularly the imitation of birds, waves, and elephants—this study demonstrates that *Asyik* is not merely an aesthetic performance but a sophisticated embodiment of moral, spiritual, and cultural values. By situating the *Asyik* dance within the Aristotelian framework of mimesis, this research illuminates how imitation functions as a medium of intellectual and emotional reflection, bridging the realms of art, nature, and royal ideology, and thereby enriching the theoretical understanding of Malay performative heritage.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis relies primarily on existing video recordings, which may not fully capture the nuances of live performance dynamics, spatial arrangements, and audience interaction that influence mimetic interpretation. Additionally, the absence of direct interviews with practitioners or cultural bearers limits the contextual understanding of symbolic meanings transmitted through embodied practice. Future research could incorporate ethnographic observation and performer narratives to provide a more comprehensive and experiential account of mimesis within the *Asyik* dance tradition.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, *Asyik* dance demonstrates how traditional Malay court dance serves as a medium for philosophical and cultural expression through Aristotle's concept of *mimesis*. The motifs of the bird, wave, and elephant illustrate a complex dialogue between humanity and nature, integrating emotional, spiritual, and moral dimensions within artistic form. This study underscores the value of interpreting traditional dance as a living text of cultural knowledge. Future research should expand this analysis through comparative studies with other regional dances and employ practice-based methodologies to deepen understanding of embodied symbolism. Additionally, collaboration between scholars, choreographers, and cultural institutions is recommended to encourage interdisciplinary preservation efforts. Strengthening documentation, education, and digital archiving, alongside innovative reinterpretations for contemporary platforms, will help sustain *Asyik* dance as a vital element of Malay heritage and ensure its relevance for future generations.

Acknowledgements

This study is funded by the UMK Fundamental Research Scheme (UMK-FUND) R/FUND/A0200/02066A/001/2025/01420, supported by Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. We also thank Mr. Nazirul Mubin Hamdan as the proofreader and all the contributors to this study.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Local cultural/ Heritage Environment (Food Included) and documentation of heritage for reference.

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