

## Towards the Last Plate: Negotiation of Minangkabau Women's Body and the Plate Symbol in Contemporary Dance

Mentari Fahreza<sup>1</sup>, Ali Sukri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Indonesian Arts Institute of Padang Panjang, Indonesia



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The dance work "Menuju Piring Terakhir" (Towards the Last Plate) is a rethinking of Minangkabau collective memory in contemporary times that seeks to explore the contradiction between the high status enjoyed by Minangkabau women as Bundo Kanduang and their limited autonomy over their own bodies. **Method:** This research seeks to describe how the body is a site of cultural negotiation symbolically embodied in relation to fragile objects, like plates that are symbolic conveyors of ancestral-based values and collective memory. Combining Practice-Based Research (PBR) and experimental choreography, this investigation looks at embodied knowledge unfolding in the creative process, a change from withholding to rupture; a reconstruction of identity. **Results:** Seemingly complete but inherently fragile, the plate serves as a metaphor for women's cultural status: kept and venerated but susceptible to pressure. Stepping into the plate, watching it break, and collecting its pieces becomes a performative act of contemplation instead of destruction. The results of the study show that smashing the final plate constitutes a climax of emotional resistance, and gathering up its pieces signals an attempt to reweave a torn-to-pieces identity. **Novelty:** This helps to clarify the situation of contemporary dance as a critical locus of tradition, gender, and embodiment.

### INTRODUCTION

In a world filled with the maelstrom of globalization, where cultures trend and expand across borders, Minangkabau is a living contradiction. This society, where the world-wide known matrilineal customs system was also implemented, assigns women as bundo kanduang pusaka (guardian of heritage), descendant of sako (title traditionalism), and manager of the pusako heritage (harato pusako). Technically, they will have the power and plenty of room to maneuver. Yet in the daily practice and deeper societal discourse, the shape of Minangkabau women's bodies and lives is twisted by a web of (often paradoxical) norms [1]. It is complex, even confused; on the one hand, Meggie is a representative of family prestige and autonomy: yet her body is also bound by gazing power; however, enculturated with values of honour (rasa malu) and decency, which are collectively held in vigilance over it. This eternal dialectic is today's world, where all these promises of individuality, mobility, and alternative accounts of rights for humanity have become accentuated to the point where new forms of expression are needed [2], [3], [4], [5], [6].

In this light, art and dance in particular become not only entertainment but a discursive site for negotiation. Piring dance classical has long been the pride of the Minangkabau community, and has achieved national and even international levels. It evolved from a rural post-harvest Gratefulness Dance to an elaboration and

rationalization in a dynamic welcome dance that fuses plate-skill agility with lively footwork [7]. Its emblem of the plate within it is congealed into an image of prosperity, orderliness, and social skill. The plates are adroitly manipulated by male and female dancers in predictable patterns, a metaphor for a well-ordered and stable society. But it is this ossifying of meaning that challenges the young generation of artists: how can we epitomize the complexities and questions of Minang women who experience living in such a contradictory world?

Contemporary dance in Indonesia Activism is often intertwined with the identity politics of the late twentieth century, facilitating work on personal and experimental levels -- which would have been unimaginable before it. Dance is no longer just a medium to narrate myths or represent customs, but it has turned into a space for questioning, critiquing, and reconstructing these meanings through the human body [8]. At where the internal pressures of Minang custom combine with the gales of freedom of expression that have blown in from contemporary art, the bodies of female dancers and the symbol, "plate" are meeting in a tense face-off once again. The plate is culturally infused - I choose it not to be taken for granted, but to be confronted, challenged, and dialogued with the experience of the living body today.

Today's Minangkabau women bear what one may speak of as a "double symbolic burden". As *bundo kanduang*, their bodies are symbols of the perpetuation of tradition and lineage; they are "plates" which must be kept whole and stable so that you can serve an intact "dish" of culture to the next generation. But these bodies are also individuals with wants, dreams, trauma, and exhaustion that do not neatly conform to the collective ideal narrative [9]. Being subject to inheritances and marriages, struggling between a career and traditional roles, or being under the surveillance of sexuality are facts that are rendered invisible in ceremonial dance performances. This disjuncture between the matrilineality promoted and the patriarchy experienced makes for an urgent body language that is honest and revelatory.

This study is significant in that it contributes not only to the development of Indonesian performing arts and gender studies but also sheds light on contemporary cultural politics within Minangkabau society. It has been argued that examining how women's bodies negotiate with and through the signs of their culture enables one to explore the processes of cultural resilience and change from a visceral space [10]. Moreover, this project could establish that in some cases contemporary art, including in traditional strongholds, is not a danger to tradition but rather a significant place for the airing and analysis of tradition to guarantee that it stays fresh and human for its practitioners, particularly women. In the end, the clatter of dishes in contemporary dance can sound different now, more shattered or shocked or silent than it has in recent years, but that is where the truest talk about history, today, and tomorrow starts.

Minangkabau culture is one of the Indonesian cultures that puts women in a very high symbolic position. The matrilineal society, whose women inherit their ancestral property, is the owner of the *rumah gadang* (literally "big house", traditionally) and is regarded as guardians of their family line. *Bundo Kanduang* is believed to be the moral

center and the protector of adat and the source of family glory. But this exaltation also comes with an ironic twist: symbolically celebrated as they may be, Minangkabau women do not always possess full autonomy over their bodies, life decisions, or movements. Very often, women are closely monitored by traditional values, social morality, and the burden of culture for her to always look "whole", under control, and in compliance with inherited norms.

It is this paradox that underpins the dance work "Menuju Piring Terakhir" (Towards the Last Plate). This work is the product of musing or meditating on how women's bodies reside between two poles: traditional honor and freedoms curtailed. The body of the Minangkabau woman is positioned as a symbol of aristocratic status, yet in practice, it becomes encoded and negotiated extensively. In contemporary society, that pressure takes myriad forms, not just the traditional weight of family customs, but also changing social standards that contribute to the growing pile of differences clashing in search of identity.

This study uses plates as the principal emblem to explain this phenomenon. Plates are significant in the culture of Minangkabau, particularly as used in performances and ceremonies. They are emblematic of tradition: luxurious, shining, and whole on the outside, but delicate and easily shattered on the inside. The integrity of the plate represents Minangkabau women's projected image of nobility, as contrasted by the vulnerability of glass and its invisible internal stresses, as historically relevant societal pressures. The idea of the 'last plate' is the breaking point and beyond - when it's too much, and our body can't take any more."

In this piece, stepping on the plate till it breaks does not mean breaking with tradition or cultural symbols, but rather opening a space to think about the cracks that develop are an expression of the body's honesty in relation to its own limitations. "A Thousand Women" (detail), 2008. The broken pieces of the saucers in "A Thousand Women" symbolize the self shattered by social, cultural, and personal demands. The body, in restoring wholeness out of the shards, is not recovering its former entirety but rather weaving a new self-understanding that is no longer determined solely by custom.

The work "Menuju Piring Terakhir" doesn't merely provide visual pleasure, but also creates an academic space of reading about body and gender together with tradition. This piece is a cultural critique of women vs custom and how women's bodies can be opened to the new ways of talking through (in) recovering brokenness. This study is significant, as it establishes a bridge between the world of contemporary dance and socio-cultural discourses about Minangkabau women, but also because it confirms that the body is itself a living archive with muscles storing history and wounds juxtaposed against freedom.

This raised a question formulated out of interest and concern: "As a living cultural practice, how does performance art engage with and mediate these tensions?" Introductions "Towards the Last Plate: Negotiating Minangkabau Women's Bodies and The Plate Sign In Contemporary Dance" became a title for the dissection of mediated experience and our fight to make meaning. "Towards the Last Plate" is not a procession

but rather takes shape as it were a spiritual and cultural journey from total confidence in set symbols to the challenge of being braced up against the possibility of destruction, remaking, or identification with its deepest individual meaning. The “Last Plate” could be the spirit residue of an identity bearing to survive, or the barrier that needs smashing.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses the Practice-Based Research (PBR) method in combination with experimental choreography as its principal approach to investigate the process of fabricating the dance work of “Menuju Piring Terakhir”. Practice-based research was a suitable research method, as it emphasizes practice as the primary form of knowledge. Somatic experience, improvisation, reflection post-practice, muscular momentum, and video footage of the first practice became significant as data that was analysed throughout. This experiential contact also enables researchers to directly sense tension in the drill when mounting fragile plates, such as by stepping onto them and then hearing them crack (as well as having a reflex reaction to the sound). The practice-based experimental choreography is utilized to feature, stretch, and jolt the body out of its repetitive movement sequence patterns on one hand and to leave space for new expressions informed through body/ object/space interaction, emerging bodies melted into objects, collaged with spaces.

Experiments take a variety of forms, from allowing the body to respond instinctively to the threat of plate-breaking; pushing how far movement can be controlled in precarious situations, and exploring what happens with the qualities of movement when emotional and material circumstances are transformed (plates before and after they have broken). The process of creation isn't linear, but instead it grows and matures in various iterations of discovery to introspection, re-choreography, and repetition. Hence, the anatomy of such a research process is to regard the body as an instrument with knowledge rather than primarily aesthetic, and to make everything that happens in and through the body (both physically and emotionally) during creativity an object of analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show that the paradox of the body of Minangkabau women is present in dancers' bodies in depicting repertoires of creative work entitled “Menuju Piring Terakhir” (Towards the Last Plate). At a very early stage of research, the body itself generated stiff, inhibited, and self-controlled movements that express an image of Bundo Kanduang, who has to uphold her dignity in custom. The body is being handled so delicately to preserve the plate, like it's saying that women have to stay intact as per what society expects. But as the probe dragged on, the anxiety over whether or not the plate would give forced a new emotional dimension. The flesh knew fear and doubt, a desire to be released from the strain. The transformation crescendoed when the dancer chose to stand on top of the plate until it broke.

It's a point not only of extreme modulation from controlled to uncontrolled, restrained to explosive, but (and here's the weird spiritual aspect I struggled with for 20 years) an emotional experience. The cracked plate is the breaking of social limits, those that otherwise silenced the bodies of women. The sound of the break is a dramaturgical shock that alters the rhythm, tempo, and course of the body's energy. Once the plate finally snaps, the body discovers newfound liberties: Movements get rowdier and broader, more truthful. The shards of the broken plates are not only visual traces, but a new space for negotiation where the body has to be entirely aware as it moves over them, risking injury and yet moving forward.

In the last section, dancers gather up the shattered plate. It is not so much an act of restoration to the original as a knitting of one's shattered self. Gathering the fragments becomes a kind of healing, a bodily process of assimilating oneself without being contained by distinctions between use and photographic experience, between what is in front of the camera and that which stirs up from its breaks. This suggests that "Towards the Last Plate" does not merely visualize Minangkabau women's paradoxes; it also gives performative space for the body to renegotiate itself amid tradition and autonomy. The body's relationship to the plate serves as a means of understanding that breaking is not necessarily acute dissolution, but rather the creation of an outlet through which one might reflect deeply on oneself.

There is always a fierce dialectic in dance in the Minang region. On the other hand, there is classical Piring Dance – a work that has been enshrined as an icon of cultural vanity dance, which conveys joy, thankfulness, and fertility; where male and female dancers' clattering plates were symbolic of a restricted movement that's strong, firm, yet replete with community social harmony. On the other hand, we have the bodies of Minangkabau women today, who inhabit a far more paradoxical world consumed by matrilineal customs that deify them as 'bundo kanduang' (wise mother) and suffocatingly patriarchal social norms which are still severely restrictive to their movements, between a rich cultural legacy and tidal waves of modernity and individualistic aspirations. This research suggests that, as a symbol, the "plate" in its investigation of Minangkabau dance serves to dislocate and radically transform itself as a site of struggle and an instrument for negotiation by women to both deconstruct, engage in discourse about, and reconstruct their identities. The trip "to the last plate" in choreographies as those of Hartati, Eri Mefri, or Supriyanto it is not a party procession but an introspective journey, at times a traumatic one that draws inner conflicts, courage to ask oneself, and the search for new subjectivity.

The negotiation process first negates the symbol of the plate. A plate is a revered object in classical dance, representative of prosperity and a communal glue that should never be fractured. In modern dance, the plate is usually portrayed as a fragile and exotic, and even dangerous object. The plates are no longer so pliable from the female dancers' bodies: they carry them by tremors, drop them with intent, or even trample them into pieces. The "breaking of plates," often a *malangkah* (violation) in many traditional societies, is redeployed here as symbolic breakage of shackles. The shattered plate

signifies the disintegration of identity, as Minang women, modern people, artists, and members of a global community. He is an unanswered question in every fragment. The act of lifting and releasing plates up and down symbolizes a back-and-forth wave of hope and frustration between the urge to satisfy traditional norms that are required and to emancipate themselves from them [11].

In these works, the bodies of the female dancers become alive texts upon which many narratives struggle for place. Bodies that in classical Tari Piring often move nimbly, gracefully, and measuredly (even in moments of energetic virtuosity) become bodies on occasion, stiff, contorted, trembling, or frozen in space. These bodies mediate the collective memory of the rumah gadang to existential anxiety groaned from the now. For instance, in one scene, a dancer might crawl with a plate on her back, an imagery of the weight of duty as a pusako (lineal heir to ancestral property pusaka) that she must bear. At others, the body has a revolt of its own: hurling the plate, throwing away all that keeps you down (though usually followed by an interlude of silence situated somewhere between regret and disorientation). It is also a conversation without clarity; no rebellion clearly wins these debates, nor does the institution definitively lose. What there is, is awareness of the conflict itself -shown in dynamics related to control and release- dancing [12].

The "last plate" here might then be a site of crystallization or degradation. In some of these works, the "last plate" is the one remaining after all others have been shattered, gripped tight, and stared into for a long time, used as a mirror to read oneself by (or rather: between) the clearest, most painful image. The plate is no longer something to which the community has a claim but the most personal of selves. It may serve as an act of identity that can no longer be compromised, or the remains of beliefs still held after all destruction. Alternatively, the "last plate" can also be a plate that is necessary to kill in order for a new point of no return to come into existence. Having smashed the "last plate," women's bodies can feel metaphorically naked: unprotected symbolically by tradition, yes, but also free to shape themselves. This phase indicates the attempt to discover an independent agency beyond the provided symbols [13].

The contemporary dance in Performance is itself a site of public negotiation. By exposing this very personal internal conflict for the public to see, the women choreographers and dancers from Minang invite the public (especially those at home) to witness and incidentally participate in a dialogue about where women are now. In the darkened space of the theater, you can reveal what is taboo; question what's sacred, without having one's flesh judged directly by real social structures. The crowd's varying reactions, from amazement and emotion to discomfort, also form part of a larger negotiation. Therefore, dance is not only a cultural intervention [14].

Finally, this article argues that the negotiation with the plate-image in modern Minangkabau dance is a survival as well as cultural re-generation strategy. It's not a rejection of Minang culture, but a rejection out of caring and concern. By challenging even the most enduring symbols through the vehicle of the female body, this new art form demonstrates that culture is a living organism and it must be able to bear up under

turbulent times. The female body in negotiation is labouring to stitch together a new discourse that stays native of the Minangkabau culture and yet goes beyond the sphere of the homely thought. This "last plate" marks the end of certainty, but is also a search for truer and freer meaning. This trend is similar to that of the practice of contemporary art in different regions in the world, where cultural icons are used to reflect on the identity crisis under globalization [15].

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding :** This study suggests "Towards the Last Plate" as a dance work, which serves as a performative portrayal of the paradoxical situation experienced by Minangkabau women, who exist between the symbolic grandeur of being Bundo Kanduang and positional powerlessness over their own bodies. By using plates as symbols of an unbroken, albeit fragile, sense of cultural heritage, the piece critically narrates social pressures that often remain unseen. Through Practice-Based Research and experimental choreography, the study reveals that bodies have the capacity to think critically with fragile objects that hold cultural significance, enabling the body to produce new knowledge through the very act of engaging with these objects. **Implication :** The act of stepping on the plates until they snap culminates indulgently in a physical resistance against oppressive limitations. The subsequent gathering and gluing together of the shattered pieces represent the journey toward forming a more honest and self-directed identity. This piece emphasizes that cracks, far from being indicators of disrepair, serve as spaces for the emergence of new kinds of knowing. In doing so, it suggests that art can be a powerful tool in helping women reclaim their own stories, histories, and meanings, allowing their bodies to retake control over their narratives. **Limitation :** While the study successfully uses the medium of dance and choreography to communicate its themes, it is limited in its exploration of how these performative acts might be generalized or applied beyond the specific cultural context of Minangkabau women. The work may also be constrained by the subjective interpretation of the performance, leaving room for further inquiry into how different audiences, both within and outside the cultural context, perceive the symbolism and underlying messages. **Future Research :** Future research could explore how other cultural symbols and objects, beyond the plates used in this study, can similarly evoke critical reflections on gender, power, and cultural heritage. It would also be valuable to investigate how different artistic forms, such as theater, visual arts, or multimedia installations, could extend the themes of this study, potentially offering broader insights into the intersection of gender, cultural memory, and embodied knowledge. Additionally, research could examine how these performative actions resonate across different cultural contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of how body-based art forms can empower marginalized voices globally.

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**\*Mentari Fahreza (Corresponding Author)**

Indonesian Arts Institute of Padang Panjang, Indonesia

Email: [fahrezamentari@gmail.com](mailto:fahrezamentari@gmail.com)

**Ali Sukri**

Indonesian Arts Institute of Padang Panjang, Indonesia

Email: [sukridancetheatre@gmail.com](mailto:sukridancetheatre@gmail.com)

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