

## Bungong Rencong: Representation of the Fighting Spirit of Inong Balee in Aceh into Dance Creation

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### ABSTRACT

*Inong Balee was Aceh's war fleet led by Indonesia's first female admiral, Keumalahayati. Inong Balee consisted of widows who lost their husbands in the war and girls who fought against the invaders. The progress of this fleet is represented as a Lioness standing proudly on the ship of the Sultanate of Aceh. This work emerged from the fighting spirit of heroic women. This Inong Balee spirit influenced the emancipation of Acehnese women. This is what makes Aceh women different from women in other regions, where Aceh women are known to have a tough nature. This spirit is interestingly implemented in the form of abstract dance artworks. The purpose of this research is to create an abstract dance artwork that represents the Lioness in the fighting spirit of Inong Balee in Aceh as a pioneer of emancipation. The method used is the creation method by Alma Hawkins which consists of exploration, improvisation, and formation. This research is expected to answer global challenges related to women's issues, especially women in social status. With the achievement of the objectives of this research, the research output can be targeted, namely a dance artwork entitled Bungong Rencong, a scientific article in an accredited national journal, and a copyright certificate for the artwork.*

### KEYWORDS

Inong Balee  
Emancipation  
Fighting Spirit  
Dance Creation  
Abstract Dance

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### INTRODUCTION

Aceh is an area known for its stories of female National Heroes. Many Acehnese women fighters are famous such as Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Nyak Meutia, Keumalahayati, and others. From some of these fighters, the story of the *Inong Balee* fleet in defending the homeland is a story that has its own heroic value. *Inong Balee* is an Acehnese fleet or army led by Keumalahayati or known as Laksanama Malahayati (Ulfah, Fedryansyah, & Nulhaqim, 2022). *Inong* means woman, while *Balee* means widow, so *Inong Balee* can be interpreted as widowed women who were martyred by their husbands during the war against the invaders. The *Inong Balee* fleet did not only consist of widows, but girls also participated in fighting the invaders, but the widows were more focused on the goal of avenging their husband's death (Ibrahim & As, 2016).

Zentgraff in his book entitled "Aceh" (1937) wrote that "*there is no nation as fanatical and valiant as the Acehnese, whose men and women are willing to martyr themselves in defense of their nation*" (Zentgraff, 1983). This can be seen from the struggle of the *Inong Balee* who had to play a dual role as head of the family and housewife and fight to defend the homeland, especially the Acehnese territorial waters. Acehnese widows and girls did not

hesitate to "take up arms" to continue the struggle of their martyred husbands. Keumalahayati's work with *Inong Balee* was likened to a "Lioness" who stood proudly on the warship of the Sultanate of Aceh (Jeffry, 2022).

Lionesses are feminist animals that hunt most actively (Shokhif & Sulbi, 2017). She is often used as a metaphor for women who are assertive. The Lioness in this context is a heroic figure. Heroic is made up of three elements: courage, sacrifice, and truth-oriented (Kasmi, 2016). The heroic nature was shown by the *Inong Balee* fleet who bravely and relentlessly defended the sovereign territory of the Sultanate of Aceh, Indonesia.

The heroic nature of this *Inong Balee* brought the history of emancipation in Indonesia. Keumalahayati was the first female admiral in Indonesia (Atmosiswartoputra, 2020). Together with the *Inong Balee* fleet with the fighting spirit of the Lionesses, they were able to prove that the stigma that views women as weak beings is not true. Women can also fight for rights like men, and even participate in wars to uphold the truth.

The spirit of the *Inong Balee* makes Acehese women different from women in other regions. This multi-role spirit is reflected in Acehese women today. Acehese women are known to have strong personalities (Ganelli, 2010). The paradigm of Aceh women is influenced by the ideology and history of Aceh women's previous struggles. This influence can also be seen in one of Aceh's art forms called *doda idi*. One of the verses in *doda idi* is *wahe aneuk bek ta duk le, beudoh sare ta defend the nation, bek ta takot keu darah ile, adak pih mate, poma ka rela* (O my son, we should not sit alone, get up together to defend the nation, do not be afraid of the blood that flows, even if you are martyred later, the mother is willing). Based on the poem, it can be seen that the mother educates her son to be strong, resilient, and have a fighting spirit even if he has to die in defending his nation.

The multi-role spirit of *Inong Balee* and the resilience of Acehese women as Lionesses became the basis for the creation of a dance work entitled "*Bungong Rencong*". *Bungong* (flower) is interpreted as a female figure, while *rencong* is a traditional Acehese weapon. So, *bungong rencong* can be interpreted as a soft woman who is actually very strong and tough. This research is expected to be an answer to global challenges related to women's issues, especially women in the social system.

This research can be compared with several similar studies or art, including: The dance creation of "The realization of the femininity of Acehese women to fight for ancestral land through the struggle of Inong Balee in the creation of dance works entitled Inong Teuga" by Witri Nur Pratiwi in 2020 in the Dance Education Study Program, Jakarta State University. The creation of this dance work focuses on the depiction of Inong Balee's struggle to defend the ancestral land from the invaders.

Final Project of Music Creation, Yogyakarta Indonesian Art Institute entitled "Women on Ship: Tough Women from Aceh (Music Composition for Gesek Ansambel) by Vanessa Risdisascha in 2020. This music focuses on the life story of Admiral Malahayati based on the novel "Admiral Malayayati The Keumala "woman is transformed in the form of narrative and appelutive music. Theater work entitled "Jambo Inong Balee" by Sulaiman Juned which was staged in 2009, 2011 and 2013. This work tells the condition of Inong Balee's troops who descended to the battlefield. This concept is presented in the form of a combination of modern theater with the Aceh Tutar Theater.

Based on some of these reviews, it can be concluded that research on inong balee related to emancipation has never been in the form of dance works. Thus, this research has the advantage of the problem solving model through the abstract dance model. In terms of ideas, this research represents a female lion in the fighting spirit of Inong Balee as a pioneer of emancipation, where this has never been done before.

## METHOD

The method used in this research is the artistic research method or what is known as the method of art creation. The creation method is a way of creating something new so that the goal can be realized (Agastya & Sudhana, 2022). The creation method used refers to the Alma Hawkins method which states that there are three stages in composing dance works, namely exploration, improvisation, and formation (Susanti, 2015).

### 1. Exploration

This stage is the initial stage in creating dance. At this stage, the title/theme/topic that will be studied in the creation of dance works is determined. Determining ideas and concepts requires research to obtain data that supports the process of creating works. The search for the necessary data uses several data collection methods, including: Literature Study, Literature study is a review of literature to collect data (Denada & Gusmanto, 2022). Some of the literature sources referred to in this research are books, scientific articles, and theses/research reports; Interviews, interviews are a way of collecting data by dealing directly, talking, discussing, either between individuals or individuals with groups (Ratna, 2010). Interviews were conducted with resource persons who are experienced *in* the issue of emancipation and the history of *Inong Balee*. After all the data is obtained, the idea/theme in this dance work is determined, namely "Representation of Lionesses in the Fighting Spirit of *Inong Balee* in Aceh as Pioneers of Emancipation". This theme is then poured into the form of dance art.

The type chosen as a form of dance work is abstract. This type is able to actualize the meaning of the work idea through the interpretation of movement based on the creativity of the choreographer. While the theme chosen is literary. This theme can convey a certain message to the audience (Cufara, Oktavianus, & Gusmanto, 2021). The message conveyed is an issue related to emancipation in the era of globalization. After the type and theme are determined, the next process is to select the work material consisting of movement vocabulary and music which are the main elements in the dance artwork. The movement vocabulary designed comes from movements that are full of accession. This movement is the result of a search in interpreting heroic and emancipatory traits in the form of explorative movements. While the music vocabulary designed is sounds from Virtual Studio Technology (VST) and accentuation sounds from percussion instruments. These sounds are combined with Acehnese vocals.

### 2. Improvisation

At this stage the research team conducted various experiments from the results of the exploration. These experiments included realizing the vocabularies that were originally designs into performance material. Exploration was conducted to determine the integration and unification of the vocabulary forms. In practice, this stage is a rehearsal process between choreographers and dancers and composers and musicians.

The rehearsal process at the improvisation stage is carried out with the aim of choosing the forms of movement that are actualized into the form of the work. The movements that have been designed are re-adjusted to the dancer's ability. Thus there are minor changes from the vocabulary that has been determined but does not change the essence of the movement. This stage is an experiment with *trial and error* techniques, namely testing the feasibility of motion against the suitability of the idea (Cufara & Permata, 2023).

### 3. Establishment

At this stage, the preparation of all material from the results of training in the improvisation process is carried out. This arrangement includes the preparation of movements to become work material in one dance unit. Other dance elements are also arranged such as music, props, clothing, stage setting, and others to form the weight of a dance which includes complexity, simplicity, and intensity.

The rehearsal process in the formation stage is carried out jointly between dance and music. This aims to unite the movements with the accompaniment that has been designed. The music in this work comes from a combination of digital music and musical instruments consisting of *Digital Audio Workstation*, Tambua, Gong, Seurune Kalee, Flute, and Vocals. *Digital Audio Workstation* (DAW) is computer-based software that functions in producing or recording music (Gusmanto & Denada, 2023). The use of DAW aims to produce sounds that cannot be produced by conventional musical instruments, while other musical instruments function as accentuation that fills the material from DAW.

The rehearsal process is gradual and repetitive. This is done so that all supporters of the work can actualize the material based on the theme of the work. Every part of the work that has been completed is always evaluated by the team. This evaluation is carried out so that the supporting things of the work can be realized according to the concept, including dynamics, tempo, and other performance expressions.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The dance work titled "Bungong Rencong" stands as a testament to the intertwining of art, culture, and research. This piece, performed on August 30, 2024, embodies the multi-faceted spirit of Acehese women, particularly those associated with the historical figure of Inong Balee. As an artistic dissemination of research findings, the work serves both as a creative expression and a cultural narrative, presenting themes of heroism, resilience, and emancipation. The title "Bungong Rencong" metaphorically refers to a woman who, while appearing soft and delicate, possesses an indomitable strength both physically and mentally.

### 1. Conceptual Framework of "Bungong Rencong"

The dance is divided into two sections, each approximately ten minutes long, reflecting distinct but interconnected themes. The first section represents the lioness-like heroic traits of Acehese women, characterized by courage, self-sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to truth. These qualities echo the spirit of Inong Balee, the legendary female warriors of Aceh who fought valiantly during times of conflict. Through dynamic and powerful movements, the dancers portray this heroic nature, creating an atmosphere of awe and reverence.

The second section transitions into the theme of emancipation, illustrating the transformative impact of the fighting spirit of Inong Balee on Acehese women. This part explores the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine elements, as seen in the choreography where traditionally masculine movements are performed by female dancers. The deliberate incorporation of these elements symbolizes the breaking of conventional gender norms, showcasing the adaptability and resilience of women in embracing multifaceted roles.

#### a. Preparation for the Performance

The preparation for the "Bungong Rencong" performance began with meticulous planning and coordination, ensuring every aspect of the production was aligned with the artistic vision. The stage preparation took place on August 29, 2024, focusing on the

arrangement of essential elements such as lighting, sound, and stage design. The placement of musicians on the front right side of the stage facilitated non-verbal communication between the dancers and musicians, allowing for seamless synchronization during live performances. This arrangement was particularly significant, as the music played a crucial role in setting the tone and rhythm for the choreography.

Lighting design was another critical component, with Par LED and Halogen lights employed to enhance the visual experience. Par LED lights were used to create dramatic color effects that highlighted specific moments of the performance, while Halogen lights provided general illumination, ensuring the dancers and stage elements were clearly visible. The interplay of these lighting techniques added depth and dimension to the overall presentation, accentuating the emotional and thematic nuances of the dance.

Publication efforts also played a vital role in the success of the performance. Digital posters were designed and distributed through social media platforms to attract potential audiences. These promotional activities began three days before the performance, building anticipation and ensuring a diverse audience. The strategic use of social media not only increased visibility but also reinforced the connection between the performance and the broader community.



Figure 1. Poster of the Show

## b. The Performance Day

The "Bungong Rencong" dance was performed on August 30, 2024, at 4:00 PM in the ISBI Aceh Performance Hall. The event commenced with an opening ceremony in the hall's lobby, setting a solemn and respectful tone. The Master of Ceremony began with a welcoming address, followed by the recitation of the Quran and a prayer. This spiritual prelude reflected the cultural and religious values integral to Acehnese society, grounding the artistic presentation in its cultural context.

A speech by the Secretary of the ISBI Aceh Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM) followed, highlighting the significance of the performance as a culmination of research and creative exploration. Once the formalities were concluded, the audience was

invited to enter the performance space, where the dancers were already positioned at the center of the stage. Accompanied by repetitive music, the dancers maintained a poised stillness, creating an anticipatory atmosphere as the audience settled into their seats.

### **c. Choreographic Elements and Symbolism**

The choreography of "Bungong Rencong" is a masterful blend of traditional Acehnese dance forms and contemporary movements, reflecting the duality of heritage and modernity. The lioness motif in the first section is conveyed through strong, assertive gestures and expansive movements that dominate the stage, evoking the image of a predator in its prime. These movements are juxtaposed with moments of stillness, symbolizing vigilance and contemplation.

In the second section, the exploration of emancipation is expressed through fluid transitions between masculine and feminine movements. This duality is most evident in the dancers' use of angular, sharp motions interspersed with soft, flowing sequences. The contrast highlights the adaptability and strength of Acehnese women, emphasizing their ability to navigate diverse roles with grace and resilience. The costumes further enhance this narrative, with bold, structured designs that hint at armor, juxtaposed against softer, flowing fabrics that represent femininity.

### **d. Audience Engagement and Impact**

The performance of "Bungong Rencong" was met with an enthusiastic response from the audience, who were captivated by the powerful storytelling and visual spectacle. The interplay of music, movement, and lighting created an immersive experience, drawing the viewers into the narrative world of the dance. The inclusion of live music added an organic, dynamic element to the performance, with the musicians and dancers feeding off each other's energy to create a cohesive and compelling presentation.

Post-performance discussions revealed that many audience members were deeply moved by the themes of resilience and empowerment. The representation of Acehnese women as lionesses resonated strongly, inspiring conversations about the historical and contemporary roles of women in society. This aspect of the performance underscored its success not only as an artistic endeavor but also as a platform for cultural reflection and dialogue.

### **e. Challenges and Reflections**

The process of creating and performing "Bungong Rencong" was not without its challenges. Coordinating the various elements of the production—from choreography and music to lighting and stage design—required meticulous planning and effective communication among the creative team. The integration of traditional and contemporary elements posed additional complexities, as the team sought to maintain cultural authenticity while pushing creative boundaries.

Despite these challenges, the experience provided valuable insights into the potential of dance as a medium for research dissemination. The performance demonstrated how artistic expression can bridge the gap between academic inquiry and public engagement, making complex ideas accessible and relatable to a wider audience. This realization has implications for future projects, encouraging a more interdisciplinary approach to the creation and presentation of art.

"Bungong Rencong" stands as a powerful example of how dance can serve as a medium for storytelling, cultural preservation, and social commentary. By drawing on the rich heritage of Acehnese culture and the enduring legacy of Inong Balee, the performance

celebrates the strength and resilience of women while challenging traditional gender norms. The meticulous preparation, innovative choreography, and impactful presentation underscore the importance of collaboration and creativity in bringing such works to life.

As a dissemination of research findings, "Bungong Rencong" highlights the potential of art to communicate complex ideas in an engaging and accessible manner. The performance not only entertained but also educated and inspired, leaving a lasting impression on its audience. Through this work, the creative team has set a precedent for future endeavors, demonstrating the transformative power of art in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, research and practice, and individual and collective identity.



**Figure 2.** Performance of the Dance

## 2. Description of Bungong Rencong

The dance work titled "Bungong Rencong" is a meticulously crafted performance that blends symbolic visuals, intricate choreography, and cultural narratives to depict the resilience and heroism of Acehnese women. The work is structured in two distinct parts, each presenting its themes and ideas through a combination of movement, music, and stage design.



**Figure 3.** First Position of the Dancers



**Figure 4.** Fabric Explorations

### The First Part: Visual Symbolism and Heroism

The first part of "Bungong Rencong" begins as the audience enters the performance space. They are greeted by a visually arresting tableau: dancers bowing gracefully, enveloped in a long white cloth suspended at shoulder height. This setup immediately evokes

a sense of unity and softness, while the sound of repetitive digital music fills the air, creating an anticipatory atmosphere. The dancers remain motionless in this arrangement until all audience members are seated.

As the last person takes their seat, a rill on the cymbal instrument signals the dancers to begin moving. The choreography in this segment revolves around the white fabric, which serves as both a prop and a metaphor. The dancers manipulate the cloth into various shapes—wrapped around their bodies, forming squares, and creating intricate designs—all while remaining within its confines. This deliberate limitation symbolizes the traditional roles and expectations placed upon women, focusing on domestic and familial responsibilities.

Despite these constraints, the movements are exploratory and structured, showcasing the dancers' ability to create beauty and meaning even within boundaries. The fabric's design allows for pockets of space at each corner, enabling the dancers to interact with it dynamically. The resilience of the lioness is metaphorically represented through this interaction, as the dancers face challenges posed by the fabric's restrictive nature with grace and ingenuity. The choreography communicates that problems are not avoided but confronted with wisdom and determination, resulting in aesthetic and meaningful outcomes.



Figure 6. Square Fabric Design



Figure 7. Fabric Cutting Scene

### Sacrifice and Transformation

A pivotal moment in the first part occurs when the fabric is split into two pieces. This act, made possible by a hidden zipper embedded in the cloth, creates a dramatic visual effect as the square cloth transforms into two long strips. The cutting of the fabric symbolizes the willingness to sacrifice, a core trait of the lioness's heroic nature. This segment transitions into movements that emphasize unity and collective action. The dancers, now freed from the confines of the unbroken fabric, perform synchronized movements that reflect the pursuit of truth and the alignment of perspectives.

Following this, the cloth is stretched across the stage, with its ends secured to the back wings. Two dancers act as central poles, anchoring the fabric, while others perform exploratory movements within its boundaries. A short horizontal zipper in the middle of the cloth creates an opening, allowing dancers to peek through, symbolizing vigilance and strategy. This scene vividly represents the struggle of Inong Balee within the Aceh fortress, with the elongated fabric embodying the fort and the dancers personifying the defenders' courage and resilience. The first part concludes with this powerful imagery, leaving the audience with a sense of the heroic and strategic nature of Inong Balee's struggle.



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## The Second Part: Emancipation and Masculine Energy

The second part of "Bungong Rencong" begins as the dancers move out from within the fabric, stepping to the front of the stage. While some dancers remain in the back, manipulating the cloth, others emerge into the foreground, transitioning into a new phase of the performance. The choreography becomes more dynamic and energetic, with movements characterized by fast tempos and vigorous gestures. This shift represents the emancipation of Acehnese women, influenced by the indomitable fighting spirit of Inong Balee.

In this section, the movements are no longer exploratory but instead focus on attractions that emphasize strength and masculinity. Traditionally masculine gestures are performed by female dancers, challenging conventional gender roles and showcasing equality. The music intensifies, with loud dynamics and pronounced accents that complement the dancers' bold movements. This combination of sound and motion creates a powerful and empowering atmosphere.

A highlight of this segment is the duet performed by two dancers, who execute interlocking and complementary movements. Their choreography exemplifies the idea that women can embody roles traditionally reserved for men, further reinforcing the theme of gender equality. As the duet progresses, two additional dancers join from the right rear wing, walking along the white cloth stretched across the stage. The juxtaposition of the masculine movements with the measured journey of the new dancers creates a visually striking contrast.

## Struggle and Resilience

The narrative of struggle and resilience is further developed as all the dancers converge and begin crawling toward the front of the stage. This low-level movement symbolizes the hardships faced by women, who are often perceived as weak yet possess immense inner strength. Through their deliberate and determined crawling, the dancers convey the perseverance required to overcome societal challenges and limitations.

The choreography then transitions to a rampak (synchronized) sequence at an upper level, serving as a bridge to the final segment. This crescendo leads to a clockwork-like movement, a metaphor for the ongoing and never-ending struggle for emancipation. The repetitive and mechanical nature of this choreography underscores the persistence and resilience required to uphold equality and freedom.

## Audience Interaction and Closure

The performance concludes with a moment of audience participation. The dancers break from their structured movements and begin an unorganized, explorative sequence. This freeform expression reflects the open-ended nature of the struggle for emancipation, highlighting that it is a collective and evolving journey.

In the final act, the dancers invite members of the audience to join them on stage. Together, they lift a long piece of fabric, symbolizing unity and shared responsibility. The group then processes out of the performance area, passing through the audience seating as the music fades. This participatory conclusion blurs the boundary between performer and spectator, reinforcing the idea that the themes of "Bungong Rencong" extend beyond the stage and into the lives of all who witness it.



**Figure 13.** Clockwork Movement



**Figure 14.** Heading Outside the Stage

### **Artistic and Cultural Significance**

The expanded choreography and detailed symbolism of "Bungong Rencong" offer a profound commentary on the roles of women in society, drawing from Acehese cultural heritage and the legacy of Inong Balee. The integration of traditional and contemporary elements in the dance highlights the adaptability and strength of women, while the use of fabric as a central prop adds layers of meaning to the performance.

Through its vivid imagery, dynamic movements, and participatory elements, "Bungong Rencong" succeeds in engaging its audience on multiple levels. It not only entertains but also educates and inspires, leaving a lasting impression of the resilience, heroism, and equality that define the spirit of Acehese women.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This research represents a creative journey culminating in the creation of the dance "Bungong Rencong." The work is a profound exploration of themes deeply rooted in Acehese cultural and historical narratives. Divided into two parts, the dance encapsulates the lioness as a heroic figure in the first section and explores emancipation as an impact of Inong Balee's enduring struggle in the second. This innovative dance was performed on August 30, 2024, at ISBI Aceh, marking a significant contribution to the performing arts.

The first part of the dance features explorative movements centered around the use of a large cloth as a dynamic property. The cloth serves as both a visual and symbolic element, representing the resilience, wisdom, and strategic adaptability of women in facing challenges. Through intricate designs and the controlled interaction between dancers and the fabric, this segment emphasizes the lioness's heroic qualities of courage, sacrifice, and truth. The choreography reflects the delicate balance between gentleness and strength, encapsulating the essence of women's roles in traditional and modern contexts.

In contrast, the second part of the dance presents an energetic and bold interpretation of emancipation. The movements shift to a more accentuated, masculine style, challenging traditional gender norms and emphasizing the transformative impact of Inong Balee's spirit. This section highlights equality and strength through vigorous choreography, symbolizing the struggle for and realization of women's empowerment. The dancers' movements are supported by dynamic music, creating an intense and captivating atmosphere that underscores the theme of resilience and change.

The creative process for "Bungong Rencong" adhered to the creation method developed by Alma Hawkins, which involves exploration, improvisation, and embodiment. This structured approach allowed for the in-depth investigation of movements, themes, and cultural symbols, resulting in a work that is both aesthetically compelling and rich in

meaning. The exploration phase involved researching Acehese history and cultural elements, improvisation allowed for the organic development of movement vocabulary, and embodiment ensured that the final choreography was both authentic and impactful.

In conclusion, "Bungong Rencong" is more than just a dance; it is a reflection of the enduring strength and resilience of Acehese women. By combining traditional and contemporary elements, the work bridges the past and present, offering a powerful commentary on heroism, emancipation, and equality. This creative endeavor not only enriches the cultural landscape of Aceh but also serves as a testament to the transformative power of the performing arts.

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