



Movement Grammar and Mnemonic Notation in the 1957 Tanjung Katung Manuscript: An Ethnochoreological Reading

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Authors' contributions

The sole author designed the study, conducted the analysis, prepared the figures, and wrote and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the 1957 *Tanjung Katung/Lagu Dua* manuscript attributed to Guru Sauti converts embodied Malay dance knowledge into a written choreographic record. Adopting an ethnochoreological perspective, the study asks which movement units recur in the document, how direction, pathway, partner relation, and timing organize its three principal movement complexes (*ragam*), and what kind of notation the manuscript represents. A qualitative document-based structural analysis was undertaken on photographic reproductions of the manuscript: instructions were segmented and coded along six dimensions—action, direction, count, pathway geometry, partner relation, and return condition—without inferring any count, body part, or dynamic quality where the source is silent, and were then compared across the *ragam* and checked against the accompanying floor-path sketches. The results show that the manuscript is neither a full symbolic score nor an anecdotal description. It combines technical vocabulary, eight- and four-count units, directional instructions, geometric pathways, and performance etiquette. Recurrent principles include right-foot initiation, paired positioning, 45-degree diagonals, half- and three-quarter-circle pathways, full rotations, temporary partner asymmetry, and return to the point of origin, which together form a relational spatial grammar of departure, encounter, circulation, and return. The manuscript is therefore best classified as a mnemonic-analytic record, that is, a record precise about the architecture of the dance but dependent on a competent, culturally trained reader for its texture and style. A triangulated, three-tier reconstruction protocol is proposed to separate recorded evidence

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from practitioner-attested and editorially supplied elements, providing a basis for reconstruction and classroom transmission.

Keywords: *ethnochoreology; dance notation; movement analysis; embodied knowledge; Malay dance; Tanjung Katung; Guru Sauti; Serdang Malay*

1. Introduction

Dance is a form of knowledge that lives primarily in bodies. Its techniques are learned through imitation, correction, and repetition, and much of what a skilled dancer knows cannot easily be put into words—a condition Polanyi (1966) famously described as tacit knowing. When such knowledge is written down, the resulting document raises a methodological question that is central to dance scholarship: what exactly has been recorded, and what has been left for the body of the reader to supply? This question has shaped the study of dance notation (Hutchinson Guest, 1984; Van Zile, 1985) and continues to inform debates on the epistemology of dance research (Bakka & Karoblis, 2010) and on the relation between the archive and the embodied repertoire (Taylor, 2003).

Ethnochoreology offers a productive framework for approaching this problem because it treats movement as culturally organized action rather than as a purely visual sequence. Kurath (1960) helped establish dance ethnology as a field concerned with dance in its cultural context, while Kaeppler (1972) demonstrated that movement systems can be analyzed through culturally meaningful units comparable to those used in linguistics. Subsequent work has broadened this program in several directions. Kaeppler (1978, 2000) and Royce (1977) situated dance within anthropology. Giurchescu and Torp (1991) articulated a European tradition of structural and holistic analysis, and Farnell (1999) argued that moving bodies should be understood as agents engaged in meaningful action. Anthropological theories of embodiment further emphasize that bodily practice is a source, not merely an object, of cultural knowledge (Csordas, 1990; Downey, 2010).

Within Southeast Asia, ethnographic and choreomusical studies have shown how dance vocabularies encode social relations, etiquette, and aesthetic values. Ness (1992) analyzed kinesthetic and visual symbolism in a Philippine community; Hughes-Freeland (2008) examined how Javanese dance embodies community and social change; and the contributors to Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stepputat (2017) demonstrated the close interdependence of sound and movement across maritime Southeast Asian performing arts. Recent semiotic work on Malay joget likewise reads movement sequences, pathways, and choreographic motifs as a living text of Malay values (Herrow et al., 2026). In North Sumatra, *Tanjung Katung* continues to be taught in schools as part of the regional dance curriculum (Manurung & Martozet, 2020), which makes the question of how its choreography is recorded and transmitted a matter of practical as well as scholarly concern.

The *Tanjung Katung/Lagu Dua* manuscript dated 1957 and attributed to Guru Sauti, the Serdang Malay choreographer, is particularly valuable in this context because it represents a practitioner's own attempt to translate a bodily practice into written directions. The documentation of the manuscript, examined as a documentary object in a companion article (Kurnia, 2026), reports technical movement terms such as *langkah berjalan*, *langkah mundur*, *langkah tari maju*, *melenggang*, and *kecak musang*; repeated counts in units of eight; partner-specific instructions; and sketches of floor circulation. These materials offer an unusual opportunity to examine how a local choreographic vocabulary encodes spatial and relational knowledge, and how far such a record can support reconstruction.

Such a record should not be assumed to constitute notation in the sense of Kinetography Laban (Labanotation) or comparable symbolic systems, which aim to specify direction, level, body part, timing, and dynamics explicitly (Hutchinson Guest, 1984, 2005; Laban, 1966). The *Tanjung Katung* manuscript instead appears to use a hybrid strategy of verbal description, geometric sketches, timing counts, and performance conventions. Van Zile (1985) reminds us that any written dance functions somewhat like a score or script: it is realized only through the interpretive work of trained performers. The analytical task is

therefore not to judge the manuscript against a foreign standard but to characterize precisely the kind of knowledge it stores and the kind of competence it presupposes.

Accordingly, this study addresses three questions: (1) which structural movement units recur across the manuscript; (2) how direction, pathway, partner relation, and timing organize its three principal *ragam*; and (3) what type of notation the document represents. The study contributes a transparent coding scheme for practitioner-authored dance documents, a comparative description of the spatial grammar of *Tanjung Katung*, and a triangulated reconstruction protocol that keeps textual certainty distinct from interpretive completion.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Corpus

The study employed a qualitative ethnochoreological document analysis. The primary corpus consisted of the movement descriptions, floor-path sketches, technical terms, and performance instructions of the 1957 manuscript as reproduced in photographs and described in accompanying documentation (hereafter “the source documentation”). The photographs were produced during a documentation session in which the sheets were handled with gloves and kept in protective sleeves (Figure 1); the coding was carried out on these reproductions. The documentary, historical, and preservation aspects of the same manuscript are examined in a companion article (Kurnia, 2026); the present article is confined to its movement content. The analysis focused on the three principal movement complexes identified in the source documentation—Ragam 1a–1b, Ragam 2a–2b, and Ragam 3—together with its description of the dance’s opening, core, and closing phases. Document analysis was chosen because the research questions concern the internal logic of the written record itself; it complements, rather than replaces, field-based dance ethnography (Buckland, 1999; Sklar, 1991, 2000).

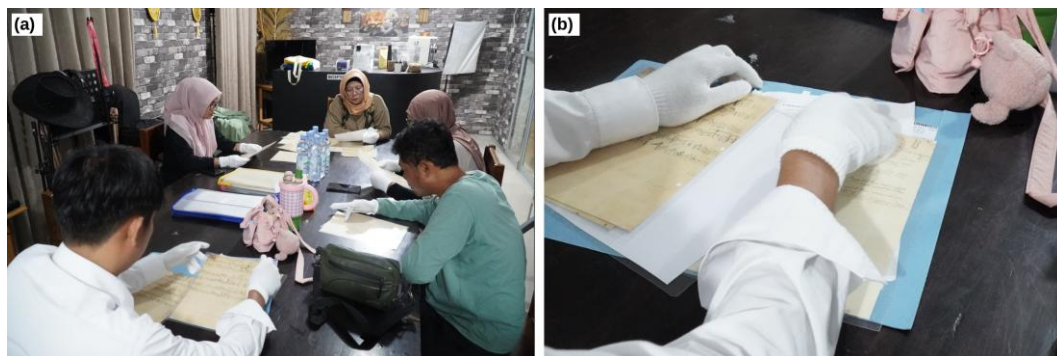


Figure 1. Documentation session of the 1957 *Tanjung Katung* manuscript: (a) collective reading of the sheets with protective gloves; (b) handling of individual sheets in protective sleeves

Source: Documentation by the Kurnia Foundation team; reproduced with the permission of the participants.

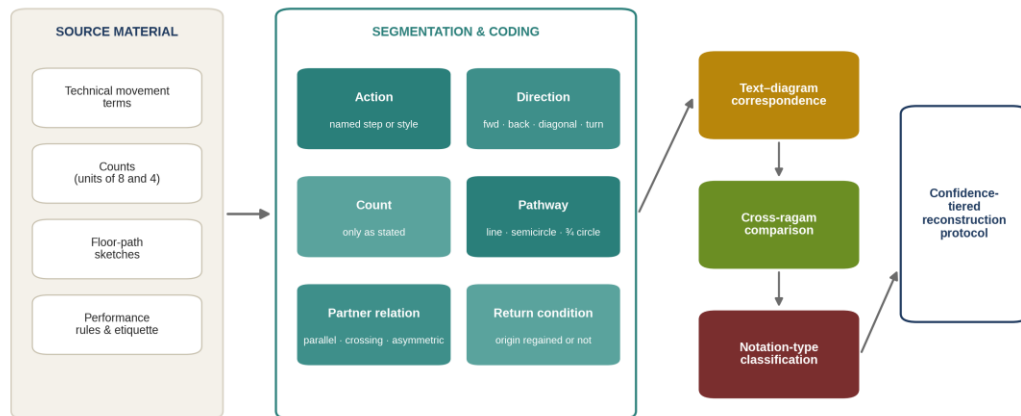
2.2 Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeded in three linked procedures: segmentation and coding, text–diagram correspondence, and notation-type classification (Figure 2).

2.2.1 Segmentation and Coding

Following structural approaches in dance research, each instruction was segmented into the smallest unit that the text treats as a complete action and then coded along six dimensions: action, direction, count, pathway geometry, partner relation, and return condition (Table 1). The segmentation logic draws on Kaeppler’s (1972) distinction between culturally meaningful movement units and their combination into larger motifs, and on the holistic structural analysis described by Giurchescu and Torp (1991). Movement terms were treated as culturally situated action labels rather than being translated immediately into generic biomechanical descriptions, in line with the principle that analytical

categories should remain sensitive to practitioner categories (Royce, 1977; Williams, 2004). A strict evidential rule governed the coding: counts were recorded only where stated in the source, and no missing count, body part, or dynamic quality was inferred. A direction was treated as unambiguous in a sketch only when it could be read from the sketch alone, without reference to the verbal text or to practitioner knowledge; all other cases were coded 'unclear'.



Rule: no count, body part or dynamic quality is inferred where the source is silent; gaps are recorded as gaps.

Figure 2. Analytical procedure: segmentation, coding, and classification
Source: Prepared by the author.

Table 1. Coding dimensions and decision rules

Dimension	Code values	Decision rule
Action	Named step or stylistic term as written	Retain practitioner term; add a gloss only in analysis
Direction	Forward, backward, right/left diagonal, lateral, turn	Code only when stated in text or unambiguous in the sketch
Count	Number of counts per segment	Record only when stated; never infer missing counts
Pathway geometry	Straight, diagonal (45°), semicircle, ¾ circle, 360° turn	Cross-check against the floor-path sketch
Partner relation	Parallel, mirrored, crossing, place exchange, asymmetric	Code separately for male and female where instructions differ
Return condition	Returns to origin / does not return / unclear	Mark 'unclear' where text and sketch disagree

Source: Prepared by the author.

2.2.2 Text–Diagram Correspondence

The verbal directions for each *ragam* were compared with the corresponding floor-path sketches to identify points of agreement, points where one mode supplements the other, and points of ambiguity. Spatial terms were interpreted with reference to Laban's (1966) account of spatial orientation—directions, diagonals, and circular pathways relative to the dancer's front—without importing Laban's symbols into the reading of the manuscript. This procedure made it possible to distinguish information that is doubly attested (in text and diagram) from information that rests on a single mode of representation.

2.2.3 Notation-Type Classification

Finally, the coded record was positioned relative to other forms of movement documentation, ranging from oral cues and verbal descriptions through floor plans and

track drawings to full symbolic notation and motion-capture data (Hutchinson Guest, 1984; Farnell, 1994; Aristidou et al., 2015). The classification assessed which movement dimensions the manuscript specifies explicitly and which it leaves to embodied competence, drawing on Laban's (1971) inventory of movement factors as a heuristic checklist. In this article, notation is understood in a broad sense as any systematic written or graphic representation of movement intended to be read back into performance; full symbolic notation marks one end of this range rather than defining it (Hutchinson Guest, 1984; Van Zile, 1985).

2.3 Scope and Validity

Because the analysis is document-based, it does not claim kinetic validation through motion capture or controlled performer replication. Its validity rests on the transparency of the coding rules, on the separation of stated from inferred information, and on the explicit reporting of ambiguities. Findings that would require embodied verification are framed as hypotheses for reconstruction rather than as established facts. Three further limitations apply: the analysis relies on photographic reproductions rather than on direct examination of the original sheets, it rests on a single source, and the coding was carried out by a single researcher. Segment-level frequencies and folio references will be reported with the diplomatic transcription recommended in Section 4, and the reconstruction protocol in Section 3.2.3 requires practitioner review and page-referenced documentation of every reconstructed unit.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Movement Vocabulary as a Mnemonic System

The manuscript combines named movement categories with concise technical directions. Terms such as *langkah berjalan* (walking step) and *langkah mundur* (backward step) identify familiar locomotor actions, whereas *melenggang* and *kecak musang* carry stylistic information that cannot be reduced to direction alone. The instructions also regulate foot initiation, partner orientation, posture, and hand placement. Table 2 summarizes what each term specifies and what still depends on embodied interpretation.

Table 2. Movement lexicon and its analytical function

Manuscript term or instruction	Primary dimension	What the text specifies	What requires embodied interpretation
<i>Langkah berjalan</i>	Locomotion	Forward walking adjusted to the musical pulse	Weight quality, stylistic carriage, foot articulation
<i>Langkah mundur</i>	Locomotion	Backward travel and spacing	Backward weight transfer and stylistic nuance
<i>Langkah tari maju</i>	Travelling dance step	Forward dance progression	Full step morphology unless demonstrated
<i>Melenggang</i>	Upper body and arms with gait	Walking-like swinging action	Amplitude, timing, gendered stylistic convention
<i>Kecak musang</i>	Hand and arm position	Named technical form	Exact hand shape and dynamic quality
Begin with the right foot	Initiation rule	Common starting side for male and female dancers	Whether exceptions occur in other versions

Source: Author's coding of the source documentation.

The pattern in Table 2 is consistent across the lexicon: the text reliably specifies *what kind* of action occurs and *where* it travels, but not *how* it is performed. Weight quality, amplitude, hand shape, and stylistic carriage are named or implied rather than described. The written vocabulary therefore functions less as a self-sufficient notation than as a

mnemonic system for readers already familiar with Malay movement style—a pattern that Farnell (1994) identifies more generally when she contrasts verbal and graphic records of movement with systematic movement writing.

3.1.2 Spatial Grammar of the Three Ragam

Across the three principal *ragam*, the choreography repeatedly moves away from and back toward an origin position. Diagonal approaches, semicircular travel, full rotations, and partner-place exchanges combine into what may be called a spatial grammar of departure, encounter, circulation, and return. Table 3 compares the three complexes, and Figure 3 provides a schematic visualization of their dominant pathway types. The figure is an idealized diagram derived from the coded verbal descriptions; it is not a redrawing of the manuscript sketches and should not be read as a reconstruction of exact floor positions.

Table 3. Comparative spatial structure of the principal movement complexes

Ragam	Dominant pathway	Timing information in source	Partner relation	Structural function
1a–1b	Diagonal advance and retreat; semicircle; partner-place crossing; return	Repeated units of 8; 4-count advance and retreat segments	Parallel, paired circulation	Introduces basic travel, exchange, and return logic
2a–2b	45° diagonals; leftward circulation; 360° turn; semicircular retreat	Multiple 8-count phrases and 4-count returns	Male and female largely matched in 2b	Expands rotational complexity while preserving symmetry
3	Asymmetrical advance and retreat; 90° change; turning; ¾-circle retreat	8-count and 4-count segments	Temporarily differentiated trajectories	Creates the strongest relational contrast before re-synchronization

Source: Author's coding of the source documentation.

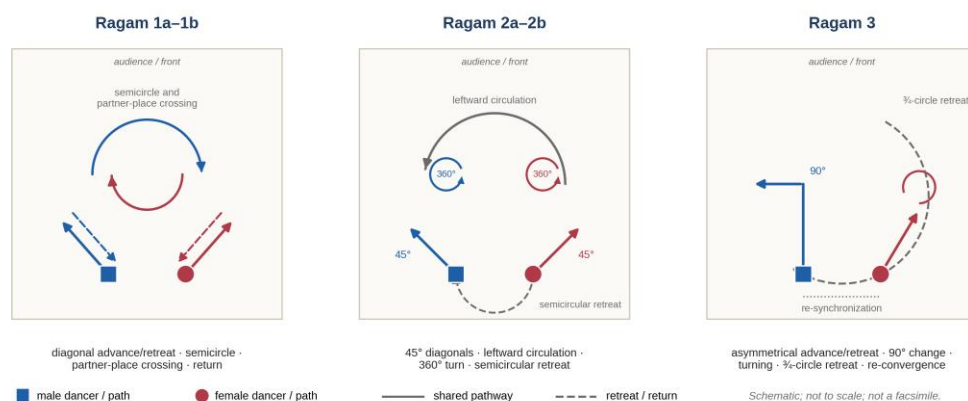


Figure 3. Schematic pathway types of the three principal *ragam*

Source: Prepared by the author from the coded verbal descriptions; schematic, not a facsimile of the manuscript sketches.

Three structural tendencies emerge from the comparison. First, the *ragam* progress from symmetrical to asymmetrical relations: Ragam 1a–1b introduces basic travel and exchange, Ragam 2a–2b expands rotational complexity while preserving mirror symmetry between partners, and Ragam 3 temporarily differentiates the male and female trajectories before re-synchronizing them. Second, every complex resolves spatially by returning to, or

near, the point of origin, which gives the dance a strongly cyclical architecture; here “near” denotes a return to the starting area of the floor path rather than to the exact starting point, and segments whose return condition was coded ‘unclear’ (Table 1) are not counted as returns. Third, pathway geometry is expressed in simple, highly memorable forms—straight diagonals, half circles, three-quarter circles, and full turns—that can be recalled and reproduced without an elaborate symbolic apparatus. Right-foot initiation is recorded as a general instruction for male and female dancers rather than being repeated for each *ragam*; whether it applies to every phrase or only to the opening of each *ragam* cannot be determined from the text and is left to practitioner verification (Tier II).

3.1.3 Temporal Organization

Timing is recorded in counts rather than in musical notation. The source reports repeated units of eight counts, with four-count segments for advances and retreats in Ragam 1a–1b, multiple eight-count phrases combined with four-count returns in Ragam 2a–2b, and both eight- and four-count segments in Ragam 3. The consistency of the eight-count frame suggests that choreographic phrasing is aligned with the metrical structure of the accompanying music, a relationship that choreomusical scholarship treats as constitutive rather than incidental (Mason, 2012; Mohd Anis Md Nor, 1993; Mohd Anis Md Nor & Steputat, 2017). This alignment is an interpretation: the musical material reported in the source documentation was not analyzed in this study. The manuscript does not, however, specify accentuation, tempo changes, or the placement of rotations within the count, so these parameters remain open to practitioner interpretation.

3.1.4 Performance Structure and Relational Orientation

The source documentation also interprets the dance through opening, core, and closing phases, with respectful entrance and exit behavior. This tripartite performance structure operates at a different scale from the granular *ragam* instructions, but it provides a frame for understanding the social organization of movement (Table 4). Partner position, gaze, and a respectful exit are not peripheral details; they form part of the choreography’s relational syntax. Comparable observations have been made for Malay joget, whose movement motifs are read as expressions of modesty, respect, and unity (Harrow et al., 2026).

Table 4. Performance phases and movement logic

Phase	Movement character	Relational emphasis	Analytical reading
Opening	Measured entrance and respectful orientation	Presentation of self to partner and audience	Establishes etiquette and the performance frame
Core	Alternating travel, rotation, diagonal and circular pathways	Negotiation of distance, exchange, and synchronization	Generates choreographic complexity through relation
Closing	Return, respectful closure, controlled exit	Maintains orientation and social decorum	Converts spatial resolution into social resolution

Source: Author’s analysis of the source documentation.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Key Findings

The analysis yields four principal findings. First, the manuscript encodes choreography through a hybrid system of technical vocabulary, counts, directional instructions, geometric pathways, and performance conventions. Second, its three *ragam* share recurrent structural principles: paired organization, right-foot initiation, diagonal and circular travel, rotation, and return to origin. Third, the dance is organized as a relational spatial system in which meaning arises from the changing distance and orientation between partners rather than from isolated body shapes. Fourth, the record is precise about sequence, direction, count, and pathway but systematically silent about weight, dynamics, and hand shape, which it entrusts to the embodied competence of its reader.

3.2.2 Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings are consistent with Kaeppler's (1972) structural approach, in which recurring movement units acquire meaning through patterned combination: the repeated eight-count phrases, diagonal approaches, circular trajectories, and returns reveal compositional regularity even where anatomical detail is absent. They also support Farnell's (1999) argument that movement should be analyzed as meaningful action. A term such as *melenggang* does not merely identify a trajectory; it invokes a culturally recognizable manner of moving. The instruction to begin with the right foot, and the rules for partner position and exit, are likewise meaningful within a broader etiquette of performance. Kealiinohomoku's (1970) critique of ethnocentric dance categories reinforces the need to analyze such conventions on their own terms rather than measuring them against Western theatrical notation.

The relational character of the floor pathways resonates with scholarship that treats dance as socially patterned action. Hanna (1979) conceptualized dance as nonverbal communication; Desmond (1997) argues that moving bodies produce and negotiate cultural meanings; and Foster (2011) emphasizes the kinesthetic and empathic dimensions through which bodies become intelligible to one another. In *Tanjung Katung*, repeated crossing, turning, approaching, and returning can be analyzed as relational organization before any symbolic meaning is assigned that the source does not directly support.

Positioned on a continuum of movement documentation (Figure 4), the manuscript occupies an intermediate place. It is more explicit than oral cues and more systematic than anecdotal description, yet it does not attempt the multidimensional specification of full symbolic systems (Hutchinson Guest, 1984) or the kinematic density of motion-capture recordings, which themselves still require cultural interpretation (Aristidou et al., 2015). Laban's (1971) movement theory is useful as a contrast because it enumerates the many dimensions that could be specified; the manuscript's silence on some of them is thus analytically visible rather than mistaken for an absence of style. Bakka and Karoblis (2010) argue that every act of writing a dance embodies an epistemological choice about what counts as the dance; the 1957 record makes this choice legible by privileging sequence and spatial relation over bodily texture.

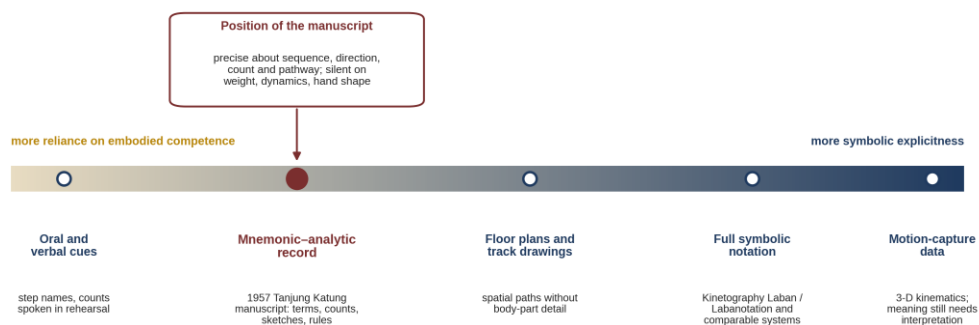


Figure 4. Position of the 1957 manuscript on a continuum of movement documentation; the horizontal axis runs from reliance on embodied competence (left) to symbolic explicitness (right)

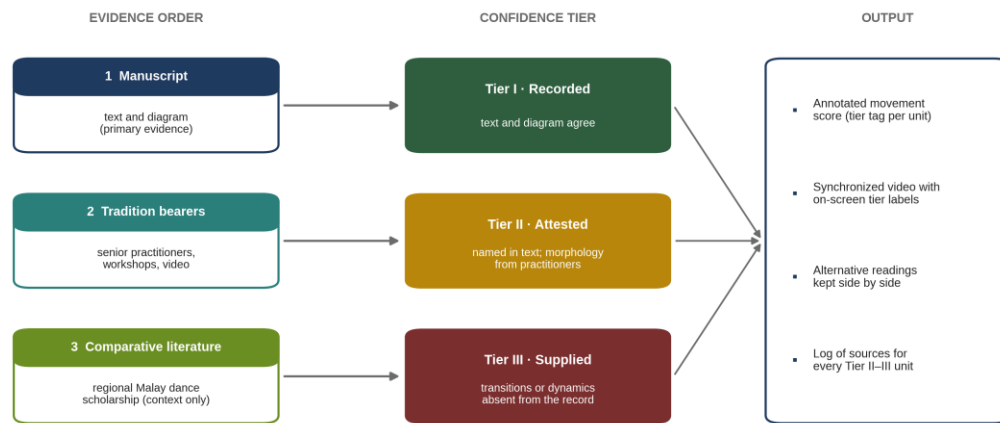
Source: Prepared by the author.

3.2.3 Implications and Applications

From a reconstruction perspective, the most important methodological principle is graded certainty. Directions explicitly supported by both text and diagram can be reconstructed with high confidence. Named movements whose exact morphology is not illustrated should be reconstructed through consultation with tradition bearers, and dynamic qualities or transitions absent from the record should be marked as interpretive additions. Sheets-Johnstone's (2011) phenomenology of movement is relevant here because the

kinetic continuity of a dance cannot be fully captured by discrete textual units; reconstruction inevitably joins recorded segments through lived movement.

Figure 5 and Table 5 translate this principle into a triangulated, three-tier protocol. Evidence is ordered hierarchically: manuscript direction first, practitioner knowledge second, and comparative regional scholarship third. Each reconstructed unit receives a tier label—Tier I · Recorded, Tier II · Attested, or Tier III · Supplied—so that lower-order evidence may annotate but never silently overwrite higher-order evidence. Practitioner workshops can be organized as structured apprenticeships, an approach that Downey et al. (2015) show to be a rigorous ethnographic method for accessing embodied expertise. Comparative Malay dance scholarship, such as work on *zapin* and *joget* (Mohd Anis Md Nor & Stepputat, 2017; Herrow et al., 2026), can guide interpretation but should not be used to fill gaps in the *Tanjung Katung* record automatically.



Lower-order evidence may annotate, but never overwrite, higher-order evidence.

Figure 5. Triangulated three-tier reconstruction protocol
Source: Prepared by the author.

Table 5. Three-tier confidence scheme for reconstruction

Tier	Criterion	Typical content	Required documentation
Tier I · Recorded	Stated in text and consistent with the sketch	Pathways, directions, counts, initiation rule	Page reference to the manuscript
Tier II · Attested	Named in text; morphology supplied by identified practitioners	<i>Melenggang</i> , <i>kecak musang</i> , step morphology	Name, date, and video of each informant
Tier III · Supplied	Absent from the record; proposed by the reconstructing team	Transitions, accents, dynamic quality	Rationale and alternatives considered

Source: Prepared by the author.

The protocol has direct pedagogical applications. Since *Tanjung Katung* is already taught in North Sumatran schools (Manurung & Martozet, 2020), a tier-labeled teaching score would allow teachers to distinguish the documented core of the choreography from locally varying interpretations, thereby supporting both fidelity and creativity in transmission. More broadly, the coding scheme can be applied to other practitioner-authored dance documents in the Malay world, where similar mnemonic records are likely to exist in private and institutional collections.

4. Conclusion

The 1957 *Tanjung Katung* manuscript encodes choreography through a hybrid system of technical vocabulary, timing counts, directional instructions, geometric pathways, and performance conventions. Its three principal *ragam* reveal recurring structural principles—paired organization, right-foot initiation, diagonal and circular travel, rotation, temporary asymmetry, and return to origin—that together form a relational spatial grammar. The document is analytically rich even though it does not constitute a fully standardized notation system. It is best understood as a mnemonic–analytic record: precise about the architecture of the dance, yet dependent on a culturally trained reader for its texture and style. The study is limited by its document-based design and does not validate the reconstructed sequences through performer trials or motion analysis.

Recommendations

Three recommendations follow:

- (1) Future reconstruction should adopt the three-tier protocol proposed here, so that every reconstructed unit is labeled as Recorded, Attested, or Supplied and its source is logged.
- (2) A follow-up study should combine a full diplomatic transcription of the manuscript, with folio references and segment-level frequencies, with senior-practitioner workshops, synchronized multi-camera video, and, where feasible, motion capture, allowing alternative reconstructions to be compared systematically.
- (3) Dance educators in North Sumatra should be involved in developing a tier-labeled teaching score, so that the documented structure of *Tanjung Katung* informs classroom transmission without freezing the living tradition into a single authorized version.

A comparison with Serampang Dua Belas, also systematized by Guru Sauti, would further show whether the spatial grammar identified here is specific to *Tanjung Katung* or characteristic of Sauti's choreographic style.

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