

# Was Gawai dinner dance a desecration or celebration?

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*Professor Datuk Dr Jayum Jawan*

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**KUCHING:** A video on a stirring dance performance at a Gawai dinner event which went viral recently has become a subject of much debate on social media.

While many Dayak netizens thought it was just rousing fun during a celebratory mode, many others took offence, arguing that it transgressed cultural norms.

Dayak National Congress (DNC) president Paul Raja, for one, did not mince his words when he described the performance as “dirty dancing” that “desecrated” the sanctity of the Gawai celebration. And he demanded an apology.

But a leader, who was among two prominent local representatives featured on the backdrop banner on stage, has come out in defence of the dance.

In hitting out at Paul, Dudong assemblyman and Bintulu MP Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing, who was present at the June 11 event, said it was just a cowboy-themed dance.

And those in attendance approved of the “unique stage performance” which combined dance elements from various cultures, he argued.

But Professor Datuk Dr Jayum Jawan, Fellow of the Academy of Science Malaysia, felt it was not so much about the dance moves or their attire or outfit.

The performance took place at a wrong occasion as the Gawai celebration is considered by Dayaks to be both cultural and religious festivals, he contended.

“Thus, the invited guests who had lent their names to the event might be considered insensitive, ill-advised and shamelessly defending an indefensible misjudgment on their part.

“The people’s representatives (who attended the event) are not strangers to the Dayak community and therefore perhaps they would have some understanding of the Dayak/Iban adat, customs and traditions,” he said.

“They have caused hurt to the Dayak community, caused desecration to the Dayak adat, custom and tradition and therefore committed an act of transgression, i.e. disturbing the balance of peace between man and nature,” he added.

According to Dayak/Iban adat, Jayum said, there would be a fine or “ukum” to restore the ‘disturbed balance’ of the universe so that man may continue to live in peace and harmony among themselves and between them and the universe.

However, he said, it would be ideal for everyone living in a multi-ethnic community with diverse culture, customs and tradition, including the Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu, Chinese, Malays and Melanau – to learn to respect each other’s adat, custom and tradition.

“Dayaks are peaceful people, and nothing will be more than an expression of displeasure at this bad display of judgement,” he added.

Jayum claimed that some Dayaks were of the opinion that the act was inappropriate for the occasion while a huge number thought that it was fine merrymaking entertainment that was also part of Gawai, a time of celebration.

However, he said, if such an act were merry-making and fine, he would think that it would be a lot better merry-making to import middle eastern belly dancers to rouse the Gawai crowd.

“They would easily outdo Las Vegas showgirls touted by some netizens in support of the controversial Gawai do,” he said.

He stressed that the keepers of the Dayak Adat, Custom and Traditions such as Temenggong, Pemanca and Penghulu should be firm on the matter despite being appointed by the government.