

# FOLK DANCE IN A FOLK RITUAL: Case Study on *Tari Topeng* (Mask Dance) and *Tari Ronggeng* (Ronggeng Dance) in *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* Ritual

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## Abstract

A folk dance as a folk performing art always has position and function in a folk ritual, generally in West Java, especially in Indramayu and Cirebon Regency. A folk dance for the case study here is *Tari Topeng* and *Tari Ronggeng* in the ritual of *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot*. The study uses qualitative method. The analysis applies Edi Sedyawati views on typology of performing arts. *Tari Topeng* and *Tari Ronggeng* can be seen from aesthetic elements, social function, and dramatization. To be seen from social function, the *Dalang* of *Topeng* and *Ronggeng* is believed as Shaman. It is also found that *Tari Topeng* and *Ronggeng* are not categorized as dramatization dance.

**Keywords:** folk dance, folk ritual, typology of performing arts.

## 1. Folk Ritual in Cirebon and Indramayu West Java

Performing arts in various cultural regions in Indonesia always relate to the cultural tradition of its people. Indonesia owns various ethnics and sub-ethnics having respective distinctiveness. They spread out in every regions from Sabang to Merauke.

Likewise, West Java occupied by Sundanese ethnic also has characteristic as the influence of its nature. The living traditions are folk rituals containing folk performing arts which become the manifestation of gratitude toward God for having given fertile nature.<sup>1</sup>

The folk rituals are spreading in some cultural regions, most of them are in Indramayu and Cirebon. The folk rituals among others are: *Ngarot*, *Ngunjung*, *Nadran*, *Bersih Desa*, *Memayu*.<sup>2</sup>

Those folk rituals are always held in a certain day and certain time in which time is sacred and holy. When the ritual is conducted, for example *Ngunjung* in Kasugengan Jamblang Cirebon which is held as a respect for Nyi Mas Gandasari<sup>3</sup>, many teenagers intentionally come to ask for blessing in order that they can get what they want. Behind the burial, there is a space and a basin (bath tub) which is prepared for those involving in the *Ngunjung* ritual. Besides, during the ritual there are kinds of arts are played, among others are: *topeng* (mask), *wayang*, *genjring*, *ujungan*, etc. *Ngunjung* ritual is held on *Mulud* month initially (Rosidi, 2000: 683).

*Ngunjung* tradition which is held in ancestral sacred places such as *Kabuyutan* (complex of the village ancestral burial believed historically or mythologically) frequently presents various arts deriving from the surrounding areas. The artists presenting the folk arts do not ask for fee, they perform voluntarily for the sake of respect for their honorable ancestors.

Apart from that, the art groups who perform on the ritual can unintentionally promote their group. In the ritual, there are many people coming from the other villages or outside the village. The groups performing on the ritual are then usually invited and hired on certain occasions such as wedding and circumcision feasts. They consider that it is a kind of blessing for them. They believe that they will get their luck after voluntarily participate in *Ngunjung* ritual.

The people on the community consider that *Ngunjung* ritual is obligatory for them. They believe that if they miss it they will be cursed and guilty toward their ancestors. Thus, there is a high participation from the people toward *Ngunjung* ritual in every *Kabuyutan*, either in Cirebon or Indramayu.

To be more specific, the situation can be seen through some *Ngunjung* rituals as follows. First, *Ngunjung* ritual in *Kabuyutan* Tambi in Sliyeg village, Indramayu Regency. Since morning most of the villagers, the ritual agents, have been preparing for the ritual needs. A simple stage for *Topeng* (Mask) and *Wayang* is provided around *Kabuyutan* complex. A sturdy stage is also built outside of the complex for *Sandiwara*

<sup>1</sup> West Java is known for having beautiful nature, as well as mountains, rivers, and customs kampong which preserve the nature.

<sup>2</sup> *Ngarot* is a fertility ritual before the planting season; *Ngunjung* is a ritual for respecting leading figure of the village founder; *Nadran* is the sea ritual conducted by fishermen in northern coasts of Java; *Bersih Desa* is a ritual for cleaning the village from disease or disaster; *Memayu* is a ritual for changing roof in ancestral burial of Trusmi Cirebon

<sup>3</sup> the daughter of The Walangsungsangs or The Cakrabuanas who are very honoured by the surrounding community and buried in Karang Mas Kasugengan.

*Indramayu* performance at night. Almost the same as in *Sliyeg*, participation toward *Ngunjung* ritual in Pawidean village, Indramayu Regency is also good. The difference is the organization of the surroundings. *Kabuyutan* Pawidean is decorated with white materials, especially the trees. The *Sandiwara* stage for night performance is built in the middle of quite large and shady burial. The folk grandeur is around, especially at night. A very large audience is coming to see the *Sandiwara* with kind of plays suitable for “local spirituality” deriving from the history and myth of the respectable ancestral village figure.

*Ngunjung* ritual is also called *Munjung* ritual, as in Muntur village Losarang Indramayu that holds the ritual of *Munjung* Buyut Wanakerti, the honorable ancestral village figure. The people from respective *Rukun Tetangga* (Neighborhood Association) march in procession with various creations. There are some with their agricultural productions (paddy, banana, vegetables, etc.), the other are with imitations of ancient animals, giant turtle, buffalo moving dynamically, twin evil spirit that successfully steal, and etc. Then, the next ritual is *Munjung* ritual in Buyut Jangkung Lohbener Indramayu. In a large and well organized complex of *Kabuyutan*, there is a meeting hall where offerings (food and drinks, and agricultural products) are kept in *boboko* (a container made of bamboo plaited). The offerings will be consumed together as a gratitude after the together prayer. Similar to other *Ngunjung* or *Munjung* rituals, this ritual in Buyut Wanakerta and Buyut Jangkung also holds folk performance. The performance held is *Sandiwara Indramayu* and *Wayang Kulit* (Leather Puppet).<sup>4</sup>

The portraits of some ritual of *Ngunjung Buyut* above show the process of Indigenous Psychology offered by Kim and Berry (1993) that is, the native behavior and thought of the people are not transported from other sides but designed for the community itself (Kim, 2010: 7). Observing the *Ngunjung* rituals in the two villages are so native that the spiritual needs can only be comprehended by the people possessing them. Researchers are usually considered as outsider. Their comprehension is considered limited. However, this limitation enables the researcher to be “spokesman” to deliver “the local uniqueness” which is not done by the owner (insider) of the tradition.

The other ritual portrait is *Ngarot* ritual in Lelea village Indramayu Regency. *Ngarot* ritual is one of popular folk rituals in Indramayu which is conducted annually. This ritual is related a lot to the field community, since it is done in rainy season as a sign for the starting of paddy planting ritual. This is conducted for respecting their ancestors. Through *Ngarot* ritual, they interact with what they believe and understand. As in *Ngunjung* ritual, in *Ngarot* there are also performances of folk arts, such as, Mask Dance, *Ronggeng* Dance, and *Tanji*. These three folk arts have their respective position, role, and function.

*Ngarot* ritual has its own distinctiveness since it involves the youth called *Cawene* and *Bujang*. The involvement of this young generation is intentionally done to inherit intangible “cultural heritage” that is, spirituality and work spirit to manage the paddy field of *Buyut Kapol*.<sup>5</sup> *Ngarot* ritual has become the cultural icon of *Lelea* village Indramayu and become the tourism agenda in West Java.



Figure 1. The performance of *Cawene* with unique accessories on their head called the crown of *Keprabonan* made of contrast arrangement of flowers. (Courtesy: Lina Marlina Hidayat, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Observed by the writer in 1996, 2000, and 2016. In 1996 and 2000 the writer saw and observed *Ngunjung* Buyut ritual in Pawidean and *Sliyeg*. On October 17 – 18, 2016, the writer observed the ritual in Buyut Wanakerti, and in Buyut Jangkung in October 19, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The youth called *Cawene* and *Bujang* are teenagers of 12 – 17 years old. *Cawene* is for girls, and *Bujang* is for boys. The paddy field of *Buyut Kapol* is the inheritance field which is quite large and productive. It is used for the *Lelea* community welfare and managed by *Lelea* village government led by *Kuwu* (the village chief).

That is the picture of folk rituals, especially *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* ritual to portray basic understanding on folk arts, especially Mask Dance (*Tari Topeng*) and *Ronggeng Dance*.

## 2. The Typology of Folk Performing Arts in *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* Ritual

The typology of folk performing arts in *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* ritual is significant to be conducted to clarify the position, role, and function of those folk performing arts. The Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance become the object of the case study here. The Mask Dance is frequently performed on *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* ritual, while *Ronggeng* Dance is only performed in *Ngarot* ritual.

Edi Sedyawati in her book *Indonesian Heritage: Seni Pertunjukan* (2002: 7) states that the typology of Indonesian performing arts can be clarified based on different criteria. First based on the beauty elements performed; second on social function; and third on whether the arts are dramatization or not.

The folk performing arts are generally spontaneous, and improvisation has been inherited from generation to generation in which the changes are developing based on the spirit of the times. Folk performing arts contain elements of beauty, among others are languages used, either verbal or non-verbal languages. Verbal languages are utterances, songs, and dialogues. While non-verbal ones are body languages, movements, or live dance. Beside languages, the other beauty elements are makeup and clothing. Although simple, they have their distinctive esthetics. Makeup and clothing especially of the folk art dancers are presented in original lines, especially in the performance using mask in which the mask possesses and presents a certain character. Beside of languages as well as of makeup and clothing, the beauty of folk arts can also be seen through the accompanying music, the rhythm of the play, and the musical harmony. In short, the beauty of folk performing arts is simple but unique and distinctive depending on the area, the form, and the type.

The folk performing art has social function since there is relatedness to the emergence of awareness toward the cultural heritage. Culture is emergent property from individuals interacting, managing, and changing their surroundings. Culture represents the collective utilization of natural resources and human resources to reach the intended result (Kim, 2010: 55).

The communities inheriting the ritual, such as Cirebon and Indramayu people, feel obliged to do the ritual, to acquaint their surroundings to the larger community. They make the ritual represent collective utilization of natural resources to obtain plentiful crop (for example, the inheritance field of *Buyut Kapol* in *Ngarot* ritual).

The inheritor communities have for a long time positioned and performed folk performing arts, such as the *Mask Dance* and *Ronggeng Dance* become inseparable part in the ritual. They consider that the ritual is not complete yet without the Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance in the process. The two dances are not merely for entertainment, but more significantly as media of transmitting values of localities and spirituality conducted as together responsibility. This is in line with Kim (2010: 149) that customs, rituals, and various parts of life are consequence of routinization, crystallization, and systematization of human practices in the simulation of the nature.

For the heir community of *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* ritual, consequence and routines have become inseparable parts from the nature simulation. They are cultural practices that for a long time have been presented annually.

The question arisen as a derivation from Edi Sedyawati's statement above is, whether the performing art is a dramatization or not. To answer this, the investigation on "the identity" of the Mask Dance and *Ronggeng Dance* is needed.

## 3. The Aesthetic Elements of the Mask Dance

The Mask Dance presents an attractive makeup and wardrobe. The makeup does not apply direct makeup but using a mask or in Cirebon called *kedok*<sup>6</sup>. The wearing of *kedok* is aesthetically beautiful and attractive since it symbolizes characters of human. The wardrobe worn is also interesting, among others is the way the cloth is used which is called *dodot cangcut*. It is also worn for other mask dances such as *Rumyang*, *Tumenggung*, and *Klana* (Suanda, 2009: 106). The clothes which are worn is *Trusmi Batik* with *Mega Mendung* motif.

The folk artists in Cirebon and Indramayu have inherited the folk dances as well as the beauty of traditional ways for a long time. Hence, the styles of the dances are called as the village name where the mask comes from, such as, *Topeng Slangit*, *Topeng Palimanan*, *Topeng Losari*, *Topeng Gegecik*, etc. The same things happen in Indramayu, such as, *Topeng Tambi*, *Topeng Pawidean*, etc.

The movements of the Mask Dance in the aesthetic context are very dynamic and various. Like other folk dances, improvisation takes significant role. However, in the development of the Mask Dance, many

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<sup>6</sup> A mask or a face cover is among others used for the character of *Panji*, *Samba*, *Tumenggung*, and *Rahwana* or *Klana*. Those characters are very attractive either in their shape or color. The colors symbolizes their character.

movements are already standardized and become the course subject in the Arts Institution.<sup>7</sup> The standardization shows that the Mask Dance can be inherited by any person, either by the common people or the academic.

### 3.1. The Mask Dance as Shamanism Act

Suanda (2009: 49) portrays how a *dalang* of the mask (*topeng*) has social function. Among others are by doing shamanism act. A *dalang* is a shaman for Cirebon and Indramayu people who still have primordial thought. When he is on the stage he will be considered as one with glory. In fact on certain events, for example on *Mapag Sri* ritual in Pangkalan village, the *dalang topeng* is considered as reincarnation of their *Buyut* (ancestor). Therefore, during the ritual, he is just like a shaman who can be asked for any kind of blessing.

Likewise, the same act goes to *dalang topeng* of *Ngarot* ritual in Lelea village Indramayu. *Dalang Topeng* is the actor of shamanism. Before the ritual begins, *dalang topeng* (named Carpan) prays to the ancestor to ask for physical and spiritual strength. The prayer delivered is a kind of “secret”.



Figure 2. Carpan as *Dalang Topeng* in *Ngarot* ritual in Lelea village Indramayu. He is praying to the ancestor in his act of Shamanism. (Courtesy: Lina Marlina Hidayat, 2008)

### 4. *Ronggeng* Dance as Symbolic Act of Fertility

*Ronggeng* Dance is a dance done by a *Ronggeng*. In *Ngarot* ritual, *Ronggeng* Dance is called *Ronggeng Ketuk*. The performer is called *Ronggeng*. Her performance is so attractive since she uses a bright colorful makeup. She dances with improvisation following the rhythm of *kendang*. Apart from her colorful makeup, a *Ronggeng* is also a shaman. The performance of *Ronggeng Ketuk* presents a couple dance between *bujang* and *Ronggeng* or between the male audience who is not a male *Ngarot* participant with a *ronggeng*. In the context of *Ngarot* ritual, there is a belief of the surrounding community if a *bujang* (a male *Ngarot* participant) can dance with a *Ronggeng*, it means that he is considered already as adult (Marliana, 2007: 86). This assumption is a symbolic act of fertility. A symbolic act is a true human need from the community performing the folk ritual like *Ngarot*.

<sup>7</sup> In the Indonesian Culture and Art Institute (ISBI) Bandung, *Tari Topeng* (the Mask Dance) Cirebon especially *Tari Topeng* in the style of *Slangit* village Cirebon has been standardized by Toto Amsar Suanda since 1983.

Considering the *bujang* as adult is reasonable since the *bujang* will later cultivate the field with their parents. Beside cultivating the field inherited by *Buyut Kapol*, they also cultivate their own field. Their hard and serious effort after participating in *Ngarot* ritual and dancing with *Ronggeng* enable them to deal with mores. W.Q Sumner defines mores as a pattern of moral and cultural acts taking role in the survival of human lives. Mores are standard traditional norms maintaining social group in managing individual behavior (Abercrombie, 2010: 359).



Figure 3. A performance of *Ronggeng* in *Ngarot* ritual (Courtesy: Lina Marlina Hidayat, 2008)

### 5. The Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance as Media of Communication

Folk arts such as the Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance is inherent with the cultural needs of the community, as well as the media of communication for the people. The adhesiveness is shown with full of enthusiasm during the performance of the two dances with *saweran*<sup>8</sup>.

These two dances are present at *Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* ritual handed down from generation to generation until today. The same as *Saweran*, the two dances, although with spontaneous movement, have actually become tradition of communication among the people. Besides *saweran* and the intimate communication, *Dalang Topeng* and *Ronggeng* become the centre of attention, the centre of hope and entertainment of the many people coming on the ritual.

### 6. Conclusion

*Ngunjung* and *Ngarot* rituals are folk cultural events presented annually. The holding of these rituals is a form of responsibility and respect of the village community toward their ancestors. This tradition keeps being held with the people's own effort, hence it is already becoming their need.

The Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance are a distinctive media of communication giving "local spirituality" for the audience and the ritual participants. However, the two does not contain dramatization since

<sup>8</sup> *Saweran* is the giving of money spontaneously from the audience (on *Ngunjung* ritual in Cirebon). While *Saweran* in *Ngarot* ritual is done by *cawene* and *bujang*. *Cawene* gives the *Topeng* dancer, while *Bujang* gives the *Ronggeng* dancer. If the money prepared is all spent, the *Cawene* and *Bujang* will be given more money for *saweran* by their parents.

they are not a kind of “telling dance”.

In short, the Mask Dance and *Ronggeng* Dance, beside containing beauty elements, have a strong social function for the village people, especially for the villages in Cirebon and Indramayu Regency. These two dances are positioned as together communication media.

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