

Binary Opposition, Binary Pair, and the Aftermath

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Abstract

This paper uncovers the study about the presence of gender system being at work in one of the Indonesian folk dances, namely *Reog Ponorogo*. According to historical notes, this traditional dance-drama art has been performed since the 13th century. Together with the changing era, however, this folk-dance experiences upturns and downturns, even dying. Only did it get reinvigorated after Indonesian independence. Subsequently, *Reog* is widely known as the icon of *Ponorogo*, its originating town in East Java province. For *Reog* dance is created based on the plot of the story whose characters are all men, it is perceived as a masculine artwork. As a result, over decades the binary opposition concept manifested in this folk dance nullified the presence of women. The women's journey from absence to presence, which was studied based on the dimensions of form, space, and time; depicts a cyclic cultural phenomenon. Male-female dichotomy which was firstly viewed as polar opposites has shifted to be equal binary pair attributing woman dancers as man's partners. The values of harmony and beauty, then, take predominant part in coloring the dynamic creativity process. Self-actualization consciousness which is ever-raising amongst the dancers signifies that today those of women and men can substitute each other; not only because of the embodiment of self-determination concept but also because of the orientation of art for art.

Keywords: gender system; folk dance; *Reog Ponorogo*; harmony and beauty; self-determination.

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1. Introduction

Since its first appearance and the gradual gain of popularity within public, the drama-dance of *Reog* has experienced its ebb and flow. Soemarto (2014:17) recorded three main periods of the torpor of this art. First, during the 1920s-1930s: the era of domestic problem. In this decade, the unhealthy competition happened amongst the groups of cultural agents of *Reog* drama-dance, particularly caused by unequal opportunity to perform. Second, within the transitions between colonizing agents on 1942-1945, from Dutch to Japanese. It was a chaotic time, so any artistic activity is impossible to be done. Later, the folk-art starts to be revived and thrive after Indonesia gained its independence. However, *Reog* drama-dance again experienced decline on the third period, between 1965-1969 which was notoriously known as the effort of communist' *coup d'etat*. It is natural that the five years' time of the political turmoil represents highly inconducive era for the artists or cultural agents, because all forms of people's art were always associated with communist propaganda.

Early 1980s has become a milestone of the truthful rebirth of the *Reog Ponorogo* drama-dance as the art heritage of the local culture. The people's art groups of *Reog* were re-empowered, and nowadays even reached the total of more than 320 groups. They involve the traditional musical ensemble, choreographers, traditional costume designers, together with the experienced dancers who often serves as expert informants. Regeneration has also been nurtured from the schooling age, started from the elementary schools through to the senior high schools by the application of local content curriculum.

As the icon of Ponorogo, a small town, or regency, which is situated in East Java Province, Indonesia, the *Reog* drama-dance is not only well-recognized by the Javanese people, but also the Indonesians throughout the archipelagos, due to the massive attempt to preserve the sustainability of this folk art. Even in countries outside Indonesia, if there are people of Ponorogo -- either voluntarily because of pursuit of a better life or involuntarily because they were forced to labor, as a by-product system of the colonial era -- as migrants, they will always put an effort to preserve *Reog Ponorogo*. Whenever and wherever, the people of Ponorogo are known for the perpetual possession of goodwill to keep *Reog* drama-dance as their identity root from being extinct.

Today, the person-by-person efforts in reviving *Reog* have been heavily supported by both the local and national government bodies. Annually, there are two times of *Reog* drama-dance festivals. The first is in each *Suro*¹ month, which is determined based on the Javanese calendar's date. The festival is opened for national scale. This event is of course not only designed as an attempt to preserve the art, but also encompass the tourism program which has been planned by the government. Secondly, to celebrate the Independence Day of the Republic of Indonesia on the 17th of August, whereby the specific target are children and students. Consequently, the packaging of this folk art also experiences some changes in accordance to the transitions of the era.

¹ The word *Suro* is originally derived from Arabic language *asyura* which means ten, the tenth of *Muharram*. According to Javanese traditional astrology, this date is believed as sacred day, which is different from the first of *Muharram* as the starting day of Moslem's new year (see on Herminingrum, 2017: 28).

As also experienced by the other forms of folk art, *Reog* drama-dance was created based on the famous local folk tale. The origin of *Reog* drama-dance which is estimated to be publicly performed in Ponorogo on the 13th century. This folk-art performance is adapted from the story of a heroic struggle of the young King *Klono Sewandono* from the Kingdom of Bantar Angin -- an area within the modern time is the Regency of Ponorogo -- who failed to marry a beautiful princess from the Kingdom of Kediri. This story began as just an oral tradition within the palace of Bantar Angin, however, when it permeates the palace walls, it became a folk-tale which then reinterpreted in the form of *Reog* drama-dance. It is a colossal performance which embraces tenfold of dancers and various components of folk-art: musical instruments, the accompanying songs and singers, the costumes, and other supporting properties such as masks and ornaments.

The dancers enacting the characters played in the *Reog* drama-dance, as commonly found in any folk-dance, are bound to the traditional set of rules, specifically regarding the gender concept of its dancers. Therefore, the study done attempts to trace the journey of the gender system taking place in the *Reog* drama-dance. The dancers of *Reog* from the beginning already have assigned gender roles according to the character that they represent. From the dimensions of form, place, and time, the drama-dance of *Reog* experiences transformations which are caused either by the factor of creative art or the factor of environment and the demand of the changing era. This study focused on the dynamic of the shift of the four main dances in the performance of *Reog* where the gender system regulates the roles of the male and female dancers based on the story.

2. Literature Review

Artworks will develop and/ or change in accordance with the demand of the art agents, resulting from their consciousness, or the system in their society. Therefore, Haryono (2009) stated that there are three interconnected aspects in the human life and its culture, including all expressions: the dimension of form, time and space. Form can be either presence or absence because of time and space. As cultural manifestation, from oral tradition to be drama-dance, *Reog Ponorogo* oftentimes also experiences some dynamic changes. Those changes encompass not only performance, character in plot, but also the dancer who play the role.

When the folktale about the tragic hero of the Kingdom of Bantar Angin flourished in larger public, different versions then appeared. This includes its visual expression; the *Reog* folk-dance. Soemarto (2014) noted that there were three significant changes happened during the New Order era. First is the disappearance of *Klono Sewandono* character as the key role of the legend, without any clear reason. The second one is the representation of common people. During the early days of *Reog* drama-dance show, the participation of common people was shown by the appearance of two servants named *Penthul* and *Tembem*². These two characters represent the subordinators acted by dancers who are expert in making jokes. To support their (actual) main role as comedian, the dancers are chosen based on the concept of binary opposition -- skinny and tall man for *Penthul* and very fat and small man for *Tembem*.

² *Penthul* and *Tembem* are names which are commonly used in Javanese folk tale and its embodiment of the servants from the noble family. They are funny characters and most likely they perform as entertainers.

Additionally, properties like awesome make-ups, foolish outfits, and clown masks are a must to wear. However, by the passage of time, these two characters do not always get involved, or even removed altogether in recent performances. The disappearance of these two characters are easily detected. That is political stability ruled by Indonesian Government; because when *Penthul* and *Tembem* are on stage, they oftentimes satirize government policies through ridiculous gestures. The third is the shift of the role of the cavalry dancers, from man to woman dancers by the reasons of religious, social, cultural norms.

The legend of the King of Bantar Angin which is told as a heroic folk-tale and rearranged to be a drama-dance basically represents a brave leader and his nobleness. Not only does he embody a young king but also has reputable dignity. When he went to Kediri, with anger, he did not ever repudiate the noble characters at all. His wise manner is pictured through the way he defeated his rivals, selected his troops, and kept his promise by bringing all unreasonable but amazing things asked by King Kediri. The attribution of having fighting spirit, honesty, self-reliance, self-determination, traits of leadership, and having courage to take a fair competition are “descriptive beliefs for masculinity” (Handayani & Novianto, 2004: 162). Of course, if this generalization is applied in gender system, those attributes are only suitable to be presented by men. That also employs when these characteristics are assumed just to belong to the dancers of *Reog* drama-dance.

Because the transformation from a legend to the *Reog* folk dance only focuses on the men characters as the main roles, the binary system is maintained perfectly. Borrowing Derrida’s terms, there is “a violent hierarchy” (http://everything.explained.today/Binary_opposition) in *Reog* drama-dance, because superiority only belongs to man.

In addition to the power of Government control, it cannot be denied that the shifts happened in the performance of *Reog* drama-dance is in parallel with the concept of pseudo-traditional art postulated by J. Maquet (1971, in Kuswarsantyo, 2014: 123) whereby in certain periods, performed art must adapt with the influence of society – the orientation from “art for art” to “art to mart”. The characters appear during the drama-dance performance are now classified in four main categories of dance, namely: *Klono Sewandono* dance, *Dadak Merak* dance, *Bujang Ganong* dance, and cavalry dance which is well-known as *Jathilan*³ who accompanies the king’s envoy together with their *warok* – the commander.

3. Discussion

It was not an easy thing for the young King *Klono Sewandono* to propose the princess of Kediri Kingdom, *Dewi Songgolangit*, whom he met on his dreams. Even, the King’s handsome brother had to sacrificed his physical appearance for the sake of his ambition to marry the princess. This dramatic event, then, was manifested in *Bujang Ganong* dance.

³ *Jathilan* or *kuda lumping*, also *kuda kepang*, is folk dance which can be found in almost all parts of villages in Java island, thus being called as folk art, because of the aesthetic level is very simple.

As a king, *Klono Sewandono* felt challenged to show his prowess, dignity, and nobleness to face King Kediri's tricky refusal of his proposal. Driven by his anger, he went to Kediri Kingdom as if battling to meet the enemy. He brought all the strong cavalry and the selected brave soldiers together with all the commanders. The sequence of these two episodes were translated into *Klono Sewandono* dance and *Jathilan* dance. During the journey, he defeated one of his rivals, *Singo Lodra* who could transfigure himself to be a wild tiger, in a fight to win *Dewi Songgolangit*. The surrender of *Singa Lodra* was illustrated as a powerless tiger whose head was clutched by the claws of a beautiful peacock which was brought from Bantar Angin. The combination between peacock's claws hooking over the feeble fierce tiger head and the spreading of the peacock's glowing and colorful tail brings about a very fantastic look. It becomes the central theme of the *Reog Ponorogo* which is popularly known as *Dadak Merak* dance.

3.1. *Kelono Swandono* Dance

Macho and all of the attributes of masculinity can be found in *Klono Sewandono* dance. The performance of the dancer is also supported by 'manly' properties. Grand crown, firm mask, and other glorious ornaments which show that *Klono Sewandono* (Figure 1-left) is a really great King, befitting the title of a hero given by his people.



Figure 1- left: *Kelono Sewandono* Dance;
Figure 1- right: *Dadak Merak* dance property.

Apart from physical appearances, characters that have tendency toward manliness stereotyping such as strong self-confidence, high consideration in taking-risk, selfish, active and aggressive are transformed not only through the dance movement but reflected in the properties worn as well. Red mask, for example, which in Javanese belief symbolizes anger, bravery, and spirit basically defines man traits. *Kelono Sewandono* is not a mere king in the legend of Bantar Angin, but he also a main actor who controls the plot of the story in *Reog* drama-dance. Even though his nobleness as a hero is unquestionable, he is tragic hero. He won the rivalry, he fulfilled all the unreasonable requirements as a kind of bride wealth of his proposal, which means he conquered King Kediri successfully. But, he failed to possess the princess of his dreams because she chose to commit suicide rather than to marry him. The center of the plot is about masculinity and the story underscores the binary pair: male and female. Therefore, up to now there is no any single woman dancer can replace the character of *Klono Sewandono* when it is performed.

3.2. *Dadak Merak* Dance

There is always a misconception on *Dadak Merak* dance because it is comprehended as the only part of *Reog* drama-dance. This is not surprising because the appearance is extremely attractive and unusual. *Dadak Merak* itself is a dance property, a combination ‘bad and good’ – a tiger’s head and a peacock (Jv. *Merak*) as a symbol of the conquer done by *Klono Sewandono* over *Singo Lodra*. Considering all the existing incredible ornaments, *Dadak Merak* could weigh up to 35 – 40 kg. Therefore, *Dadak Merak* dance mainly relies on physical strength of the dancers; and for so many years, they are always presented by men. However, in the last three or four years, female dancers start to participate in performing the *Dadak Merak* dance. As a matter of fact, the dancer’s physical strength is not the same as the masculinization concept within western feminism. In this context the term ‘macho hero’ is not known by the Javanese, because it is believed that self-esteem has to be strived equally by both woman and man. Women have the rights to reach self-actualization by actively making choices without being burdened of their gender status. This embodies the realization about self-determination which propagates even wider in Indonesia lately.

Binary opposition concept which is different from the polar opposites is also shown from the appearance of the *Dadak Merak* itself. The blending idea of opposition: goodness and badness, beauty-ness and ugly-ness, and other positive-negative traits highlighted as an ideal pair becomes unique property (Figure 1- right) for *Dadak Merak* dance. It renders the important of harmony which is traditionally believed by Javanese to reach the state of qualified human being. Of course, this can be traced from the Javanese art products, like *Reog Ponorogo*, which essentially always emphasize the harmony of the aesthetic values and the rights of the cultural agents.

3.3. *Bujang Ganong* Dance

As the tradition governs the ways to propose a member of royal family, the bridegroom first must delegate an envoy. The envoy sent by *Klono Sewandono* is *Klono Wijoyo*, also called as *Pujonggo Anom*⁵, his own brother besides serving as the prime minister of the Bantar Angin Kingdom. The whole proposing intention has become the prelude of tragedy.

Realizing that his brother is extremely handsome the King worried that the princess would fall in love with young his brother, instead of him. Thus, the young brother was ordered to wear a very ugly mask to conceal his dashing face. Unfortunately, after the proposing ceremony had ended and *Pujonggo Anom* returned to Bantar Angin, he could not take off his mask. The curse of the King of Kediri had turned the handsome face to be an ugly one, which made he earn the nickname of *Bujang Ganong*⁶. That is why, to make it suitable with the plot of the story from time to time the dancer of *Bujang Ganong* does ever detach the odd face-mask (Figure 2-left and 2-right).

⁵ *Dadak Merak* is a part of binary opposition, and Javanese believe that it is life: ugly and beautiful, bad and good, should be together, so there is a balance of harmonious life.

⁵ *Pujonggo Anom* from the word *Pujonggo* which means a wise man or a great poet and the word *Anom* which was used a long time ago as a noble title for young man of royal family.

⁶ In Javanese *Bujang* is bachelor and *Ganong* is weird-shape forehead.



Figure 2 - left: The old version mask;
Figure 2 - right: The new version mask of *Bujang Ganong*.

Apart from the complicated movements when it is danced, *Bujang Ganong* character is very akin to the masculine attributes. He is optimistic, aware of risks, responsible towards his deeds and unemotional. This description is represented in all accurate and fast movements, including the stance of martial art, during the performance. Thus, until now, *Bujang Ganong* has never been done by female dancers.

Actually, the dance of *Bujang Ganong* teaches on how man should face reality. If the character of *Bujang Ganong* is regarded as a tragic victim, in the drama-dance, the dancer shows the opposite. Through his funny energetic movement, the fragment on the journey of *Pujonggo Anom* in accompanying his brother, *Klono Sewandono* always triggers laughter of the audiences; a tragic-comedy dance.

3.4. *Jathilan* Dance

Jathilan dance (Figure 3-left) illustrates the cavalry which escorted *Klono Sewandono*'s journey to the 'battle'. The rhythm of horses galloping together with the steps of the courageous commanders brings about the harmony of the beautiful musical rhyme and the dance which is extremely exquisite. The character of the commanders is called *warok* and the dance' name is *warok-an* (Figure 3-right).



Figure 3-left: *Jathilan* dance performed by young ladies;
Figure 3-right: *Warok* and the *Warok-an*, the macho dance.

Originally, the dancers of *Jathilan* are young boys of 12-15 years old whose performance must be as beautiful as women. Their movements are graceful, and their face must be naturally handsome, to the point of resembling female complexion. The

Javanese called this kind of dancers as *gemblak*⁷, feminine and coquettish. Different from the *Jathilan*, *Warok* or *Warok-an* dance which pictures the commanders guarding the cavalry are played by skillful man dancers showing brave, firm, and dashing movements. The binary pair in this dance, therefore, arises a conclusion about homosexual relationship. Even some studies also assumed about the existence of this homosexual bond between *gemblak* and *warok*.

Then, in the name of religion and morality, by the year of 1978s, Indonesian Government banned the dance of *Jathilan* done by *gemblak*-s and replaced them by female dancers. Within the last years, however, the reconstruction of *Reog* art performance has been carried out by the educated and professional dancers of which men can dance *Jathilan* whenever they want as long as the orientation is for art. They attempt to erase the homosexual image which is still regarded as taboo – a movement of re-centering point for the sake of art for art.

Folk-art is frequently viewed as an art work with very simple artistic values. But, *Reog Ponorogo* as a folk-art has experienced changes in the same way as the high culture products. The study on gender system which takes place *Reog* dance shows that the dynamic changes of the form, in this case is the dancers, happens along with the change of time and space. To a large extent, the change of gender system involves many aspects, starting from centralization towards male dancers because of the story plot-based standard, decentralization upon considering the art values, as well as the recentralization when the cultural agents must be able to decide on their own, as the embodiment of self-actualization.

This can be seen from the evolving process of the dancers *Jathilan* dan *Dadak Merak* in accordance with gender system. At the early phase of the performance until before the 1980s, women were completely excluded from the *Reog Ponorogo* dance. This also goes with man dancers who tend to display womanly behaviors because of the constructed negative image about homosexuality. Their activities were overruled either due to the power of government or the control of society. However, together with the rise of appreciation towards artwork, the realization of the equality of rights, and the basic cultural aspects of woman position in Javanese society, the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender system in *Reog* drama-dance is still occurring today.

Of course, Javanese culture which upholds conformity is also playing its significant role towards the continuity of traditional art. It is thus not uncommon that it doing their artwork, the expressions of Javanese folk-art as in *Reog* drama-dance most likely always bring moral-ethical messages. Synthesizing the polar opposites, as the basis of binary opposition, is not wrong.

4. Conclusion

When scrutinizing binary opposition, the consequence is the paradigm of a difference. That also applies in a discussion about gender system working in *Reog Ponorogo* dance, which results in the principles of differences between the dancers representing

⁷ *Gemblak* in Javanese world view is always associated with negative meaning because it refers to homosexual bond which is prohibited (?) by religion and socio-cultural norms.

the characters of the Bantar Angin legend. Transformation from a legend to folk-tale and to a colossal drama-dance continuously experiences shifts and changes. The sequence of the fragments of story presented by the dancers who are predominantly men does not appear for the hierarchy in cultural context. Because, in Javanese culture, traditionally equality between women and men is highly appreciated; especially in culture expressions. This constructed self-actualization concept of course supports the today's re-centering movement in art creativity process.

Based on its historical journey, the dynamic gender system in *Reog* drama-dance is not only standardized by the characters represented in a dance but also the influencing external factors. The gender role of the dancers depends on the policy of Indonesian Government of each era, society control: religious, social, and cultural norms, as well as the orientation of the art itself.

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