

Theater for Development: The Existence and Transformation of Folk Performances in the East Java Across the Time

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Abstract

Historically, Theatre for Development (TfD) cannot be separated from the history of pre-colonialism, especially that which occurred in third world countries. TfD is a part of development communication, and it has become an important part of several countries, especially third world countries, although its practice is not as widespread as before. In Indonesia, before the existence of modern entertainment media such as television and social media, people grew up with folk performance (Pertura). Folk Performance has lived through the ages because of the inheritance process carried out by its adherents. Communication for development through folk performance continues to live among themselves, originates from their original culture and is useful as a means of interacting on different occasions. Thus, it is not uncommon for them to pass on moral values using this media to their descendants. As a multicultural country, every region in Indonesia has many styles of folk performances. In East Java, *ludruk* is local wisdom in the form of folk performance which still exists as traditional entertainment. The plays brought to the stage vary from social criticism, politics, advice on moral values to realities that are close to everyday life. However, the nuances of the criticism were mixed into something humorous so that it was popular with public. By using qualitative-explorative approach and data collection from with literature study, this paper will explain the transformation of Theatre for Development in East Java which still exists today using a development communication perspective.

Keywords: Development Communication, Folk Performance, Transformation

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Introduction

In terms of the development process, targets would not be achieved unless those targets are communicated. Thus, to mitigate that possibility, development communication is indispensable (Sarvaes, 2008). Development communication is defined as a communication strategy integrated with development projects. According to Mefalopulos (2008), development communication “supports sustainable change in development” precipitates the conducive environment for development, assesses risks and opportunities, and disseminates information which drives social change. Thus, Childers & Colle in Sarvaes (2008) state that communication is a vital component in development programs.

There are a range of approaches in development communication, one of which is through theatrical performance. In *The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change* (2014), this approach is referred to as *Theater for Development* (TfD) which is defined as an instrument that uses drama and theater to catalyze social changes within the framework of development. For Asante & Yirenkyi (2018), Theater for development is a development approach which involves the public to establish development actions. Wilson (1994) in Asante & Yirenkyi (2018) also stated that theater for development illustrates the reality through a ‘slice-of-life representation’, performed with costumes and dialogues which showcase life experiences and trigger reactions from the audiences.

Several previous studies about TfD, such as *Theater as an Agent of Change: Mobilising Against Marijuana Addiction in Tombia Ekpetiama Community in Bayelsa State* (2020) and *Theater for development in contemporary Nigeria: problems and prospects* (2020) show that theatrical approach can represent social issues in a dramatic manner, so audiences can discern those issues in fresh and critical ways.

In Indonesia, the Theater for Development approach is manifested through folk performances. Waluyo & Rosmawati (2014) define folk performance as a traditional art in the form of folk-art performance reproduced by local culture. As a socio-cultural symbol, folk performance acts as value-filled entertainment that can reinforce social identity. Harahap (2012) denotes the strong attractiveness of folk performance, because it has been born and cultivated among society, which potentially reach a broader audience (one to many).

Folk performances in Indonesia are usually showcased in a traditional art exhibition based on each local culture (Panduan Pembinaan Pertura Kota Surabaya, 2018). Along with the Community Information Group (KIM), Media Supervisor Group, and Professional Organization Communication Institution, folk performance has the responsibility to disseminate appropriate information according to local needs and characteristics, aligned with the Regulation of the Minister of Communication and Information of the Republic of Indonesia No. 08/PER/M.KOMINFO/6/2010 about the guidelines for the development and empowerment of social communication institutions. Folk performance has the responsibility to disseminate information and absorb community aspirations.

The Province of East Java is one of the regions in Indonesia, which has a strong historical relationship with Theater for Development. For instance, it is noted that *Ludruk* was an instrument used to criticize the Japanese colonialism in Surabaya (Waluyo, 2000). *Ludruk* itself can be defined as a folk performance in the form of traditional theatrical art from Surabaya, East Java. The strong relationship between Theater for Development praxis in East Java folk performance is the basis of this research as a contribution to Development

Communication discipline by exploring its approaches in theatrical performances. Using the qualitative-explorative approach, as well as data collection through literature study, this research aims to explore the existence and transformation of folk performance in East Java as a tool for social change.

Theoretical Framework

Theater for Development

Theater for development/ popular theater/ Community theater/ folk Theater is a theory that uses theatrical performance as a tool for social interventions, such as driving social changes, enhancing critical consciousness, and empowering communities to elevate their quality of life. According to Asante & Yirenkyi (2018), theater for development is a development approach, which involves community in establishing the development actions.

Theater has the ability to illustrate reality through story-telling. Wilson (1994) in Asante & Yirenkyi (2018) refers to it as a (slice-of-life representation), complete with costumes and dialogue that shares a relatable story and evokes reactions from the audiences. Theater for development (TfD) is a medium to drive community participation in the development process democratically (World Bank, 1994). Therefore, it is obvious that theater for development becomes a model of participative development communication, challenging the elitist communication model. Its core focuses are to 'fix' and empower poor and underdeveloped communities with resources and knowledge from their own (Asante, 2016; Asante & Yirenkyi, 2018).

According to Prentki (1998), there are two major theories related to the development of TfD; the *Critical Pedagogy* popularized by Paulo Freire in the 1960s and *Participatory/Popular Theater* popularized by Augusto Boal Popule through his work, *theater of the oppressed* (1970-1980). As stated by Freire (1972) in Prentki (1998), "*Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education.*" Freire's ideas influence the theater for development mode because it operates through dialogues. Thus, this model's orientation is to build consciousness in the form of reflections to recognize the power that shapes community.

Result and Discussion

Transformation of Folk Performance as a Tool for Social Change Throughout the Ages

The rapid enhancement of digital technology has an immense impact on the communication process within society. However, there are some communities which still benefit from the utilization of traditional communication media (Panduan Pembinaan Pertura Kota Surabaya, 2018). Traditional media cannot be separated from traditional art, which is a form of art extracted from folklores in traditional media (Nurudin, 2004). Folk performance can be defined as a traditional art that is birthed and cultivated within a society, which manifests in a range of forms, such as puppetry, folk story-tellings, folk dances, ballads, and comedies (Harun & Ardianto, 2012). In its development, folk performance was enhanced and empowered by the government that utilizes it as a development communication medium. It means that in the traditional performance, government can disseminate and circulate

information through lores and narrations delivered by artists (Panduan Pembinaan Pertura Kota Surabaya, 2018).

That statement is supported by the existence of the Regulation of the Minister of Communication and Information of the Republic of Indonesia No. 08/PER/M.KOMINFO/6/201 about the guidelines for the development and empowerment of social communication institutions. Folk performance has the duty to disseminate information and absorb community aspiration. Here, folk performance is expected to be an alternative communication and information medium for communities with certain characteristics. Along with the Community Information Group (KIM), Media Supervisor Group, and Professional Organization Communication Institution, folk performance has the responsibility to disseminate appropriate information according to the local needs and characteristics. Although, there are some principles that should be considered; 1) Sinergy, 2) Structured, 3) measured, 4) integrated, 5) Participatory, 6) Sustainability, 7) Collaboration.

Specifically, in article (4), development and empowerment of social communication institution in this context is directed to:

- a. Actualize national information dissemination network;
- b. Drive community participation in democracy and development, as well as act as an enhancer of value;
- c. Drive mass media quality improvement and public information literacy; and
- d. Develop an information society.

According to Harahap (2012), folk performance has a strong attractive quality that has been cultivated among the people. Moreover, in the context of rural communities, development communication through folk performance has a great possibility to reach a broad audience. In Indonesia, folk performance becomes an important part of its history. There are at least four crucial periods that explain the role of folk performance as a medium to drive social change (Waluyo, 2000; Panduan Pembinaan Pertura Kota Surabaya, 2018). Those are:

- 1) Folk Performance during pre-independence/colonialism period
In this period, folk performance was a tool for resisting colonial power.
- 2) Folk Performance during the old order
Became a tool for propaganda of the authorized party.
- 3) Folk Performance during the new order
In this period, it became an Enlightenment platform (top-down) or development communication media for government to the public.
- 4) Folk Performance during the post reformation – present days
Through the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, it collaborates with the government to disseminate development messages and cultural preservation channel.

The four periods explain the important role of folk performance in Indonesia until the present days. Folk performance as a development communication medium can be enjoyed by all levels of society with a various range of education levels due to its relatable and entertaining messages, which can easily influence people's behavior. According to Istiyanto (2003), folk performance lives within and comes from the community and acts as an interaction platform in one different opportunity. Thus, it is not rare that moral values are inherited strongly in the community.

The need for traditional communication media will always live based on the need for moral inheritance that the community considers valuable, effortless, and unaffected by foreign

cultures. Folk performance can be defined as a local wisdom, which is a local idea that is wise, full of discernment, and positive, cultivated and subscribed by the community (Sartini, 2004). This results in making folk performance survive the ages and reinforced due to the continuous inheritance.

Folk Performance: Traditional Style of Development Communication Agents in East Java



Figure 1: Theater for Development Praxis in Mojokerto Regency
(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Mbyi0sc8CQ&t=8256s>)

In East Java, Theater for Development practices still exist and are popular until these days. As discussed previously, the post-reformation period of Theater for Development has been guided by the Ministry of Communication and Informatics as a government's ally in disseminating development messages and preserving culture.

On November 7th 2022, the regent of Mojokerto Regency carried out an outreach on excise regulations at the Pulorejo Village Field, Dawarblandong District, using the medium of folk performances. There, the regent of Mojokerto used folk performances including Reog Ponorogo, Campursari, traditional dances, and slapstick as development communication agents. The messages focus on the issue of controlling the circulation of illegal cigarettes, considering that excise on tobacco products is one of the sources of national income that are used for development and community welfare.

Development messages against illegal cigarettes are conveyed through the narrative of *dagelan* performances (slapstick). The folk performance that becomes a development communication agent comes from their authentic local culture. Thus, everyone in Mojokerto Regency, despite their educational level, could enjoy the light and entertaining messages delivered by the performance.



Figure 2: Outreach on Health Issues by the East Java Provincial Health Service Through Folk Performances

(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GU9_1K45Ggg&t=7462s)

On September 25th 2021, the East Java Provincial Health Service carried out an out reach activity for public health services such as Posyandu through slapstick folk performances. In the development communication process, the messages conveyed included health facilities for pregnant women, hours of health examination services, and the community’s rights in accessing health services. Different from the Mojokerto Regency which holds performances in open fields, the East Java Provincial Health Service did this via Youtube live stream due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 3: Folk Performance in Surabaya

(Source: Tribunjatim.com; Panduan Pembinaan Pertura Kota Surabaya, 2018)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Surabaya City government held folk performances every once a month. One of which was *Ludruk* that was performed in each sub-district to provide entertainment and outreach with traditional nuances towards the community.

In 2017-2019, folk performance became one of the development communication approaches which turned into a top priority for the Surabaya Mayor in providing direction, outreach, training, and extension for the community.

Ludruk hit its golden age in the New Order era because it dominated everyone's preference of entertainment. The development and transformation over the age have made *ludruk* increasingly forgotten. Capturing the state of *Ludruk* which has been increasingly being run over, the government of Surabaya City collaborates with *Ludruk* artists to preserve the tradition. Instead of modernizing *Ludruk* by providing them with indoor theater buildings, the governor teamed up with them and assigned them the duty as a development communication agent of Surabaya City Government.

Conclusion

There are four crucial periods that explain the role of folk performances, such as a tool of resistance against colonialism, a tool for propaganda of the party in power, a tool for information or development communication media for the government (top-down) and its partners in delivering messages, as well as preserving culture. Folk performances can still exist and live across the ages because of several groups that still utilize traditional media which later on are reinforced by the government by assigning them the duty of development communication agents. The provincial government of East Java still uses folk performances for development communication while adapting to the modern conditions, for example by broadcasting them via online live stream or when it becomes a routine program (act as a primary tool) in disseminating development messages. This innovation was implemented with the hope that folk performances could become an alternative medium of communication and information for the people.

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