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## The Oral Panji Story Rendered by the Javanese Mask Puppet Show

*This study focuses on the rendition of the oral Panji Story, registered in Unesco's Memory of The Word Register in 2017, by the Javanese Mask Puppet Show. We demonstrate that in telling the story, the performer does not use a prepared script. The story is "fluid", with several variations and innovations based on the performer's interpretation. Its composition depends on both the context of the performance and its length. In Javanese culture, the creativity of the performer (dalang) extends only to the way he renders the story, whereas its title and the order of events are a "public property". The nyantrik method is a mode whereby the tradition is passed down from one generation to another. The method not merely ensures the transfer of the performer's knowledge and experience to other people, but maintains the connection with the Almighty. We analyze the specificity of rendering an oral story in traditional performing art.*

**Keywords:** *Composition, Javanese Mask Puppet Show, Panji Story, knowledge transfer, oral tradition.*

### Introduction

Indonesia is a multicultural country. There are 1340 ethnic groups in Indonesia, and each ethnicity has its cultural products. Therefore, the country is rich in cultural expression (Rianti et al., 2018; Santyaningtyas, Noor, 2016). An example of this is the "Panji Story", included into Unesco's Memory of The World Register in 2017 (Tol, 2019). This original Javanese story appeared in the Majapahit Kingdom period (Poerbatjaraka, 1968: 404; Munandar, Susantie, 2014). The narrative is about the love

affair between Panji Inu Kertapati, prince of the Jenggala Kingdom, and Sekartaji (or Candrakirana), princess of the Kediri Kingdom. The romance between them is covered up with secrecy and disguise, requiring the characters to travel on an adventure to find each other. Along the way, they will encounter enemies who are eventually defeated. At the end of their journey, they finally meet and get married.

Panji stories have been viral among Southeast Asian people up to the present day, spread widely to various archipelago regions, and even to mainland Southeast

Asia, namely Java, Bali, Palembang, Makassar, Lombok, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Thailand (Fang, 2013: 115–116; Kieven, 2014: 29–30; Poerbatjaraka, 1968: 408–410; Zoetmulder, 1994: 532–533). This is shown by the many variations of Panji stories found in ancient manuscripts and even folk tales. For the written version (manuscript), at least 239 Panji manuscripts are known, 140 of which are Javanese Panji (Kaeh, 1989: 349–357). Furthermore, many other variants of the oral narrative have not been documented. Several fairy tales can be classified as Panji stories, including *Keong Emas* (Golden Snail), *Timun Emas* (Golden Cucumber), *Panji Laras*, *Andhe-andhe Lumut*, and *Kethak Ogleng* (Arrogant Monkey) (Saputra, 2014). Therefore, it is not wrong for Robson (1971: 12–13) to call Panji stories a genre.

The Panji Story is still used as a basis for performance in various places in Java: for example in the Malang Mask Puppet Show, staged by *padepokan*\* Mangun Dharma, namely *lakon*\*\* *Lahire Panji* (The Birth of Panji). This title, unlike others, centers on the love story of Panji Asmarabangun's parents, Panji Amiluhur and Dewi Sakyaningrat. This play is an exciting phenomenon to study, because the source of the story is an oral tradition living in the community. Therefore, the existence of The Birth of Panji must be inextricable from people's sociocultural life, which preserves historical and artistic elements handed down intergenerationally. This story was composed, transmitted, and performed orally.

The Birth of Panji, staged in the Mask Puppet show, raises several questions, such as how the performer composed his story and how the story is transmitted intergenerationally. It is based on the fact that the Panji Story used as the basis of the performance does not have a standard text (script). The Panji Story used only comes from memory of the performance. The performer learns the story orally, remembers it, performs it, and teaches it to the next generation. Moreover, the Panji Story performance in the mask puppet show is presented as a drama dance. Therefore, understanding the cultural aspects of society inherited from ancestral oral traditions is very important.

Early research on the Panji Story was primarily concerned with its origins. W.H. Rassers suggests the historical relationship between The Panji Story and the life of King Airlangga as the ruler of East Java at the beginning of the 11th century AD, as well as between Ken Angrok, the founder of the Singasari Kingdom, and Raden Wijaya, the founder of the Majapahit

Kingdom, a possible prototype of Panji (1922: 132–136). In addition, C. Berg (1928: 189–190) claims that the Panji Story circulated between 1277 and 1400 AD. On the other hand, R.M. Poerbatjaraka (1968: 404) said that it originated during the height of the Majapahit Kingdom, and spread across the archipelago long after. The question of when the Panji Story was formed in the archipelago is still being debated.

Research on the ancient manuscripts of the Panji Story has also been carried out, such as the efforts to translate it by Rassers (1922: 14–19) and Poerbatjaraka (1968: 3–369). K.H. Saputra (1998: 1–136) investigated the structure of the Panji Story variants. Furthermore, researchers are investigating the Malang Mask Puppet Show. These studies can be grouped into five categories according to their focus. The first includes the analysis of the structure and meaning of symbols in the show (Astrini, Amiuza, Handajani, 2013; Hidayat, Pujiyanto, 2014; Minarto, 2010), the second, analysis of the changes in, and functions of, mask puppet show (see, e.g., (Prasetyo, 2004)). The third groups combines the researches on the transformation aspects of Panji Story in the Malang Mask Puppet Show (see, e.g., (Hikmah (2011: 11))), the fourth, researches that explore the historical-sociological aspects of the Malang Mask Puppet Show (see, e.g., (Kamal, 2010)). The fifth group studies the systems of values in the Malang Mask Puppet Show (see, e.g., (Sumintarsih et al., 2012: 60–90)).

In the previous studies of Panji stories and Malang Mask Puppet Show, the problem of their oral version has never been addressed. It can also be seen that various approaches are used in studying the Malang Mask Puppet Show, but as a product of oral culture, aspects of orality are ignored. The research is not based on performance but is text-oriented. The data taken are also independent of the context and process of its creation, so that the story of Panji in the Malang Mask Puppet Show derived from oral tradition is considered the same as written literature, even though these are in fact very different. The performer remembers the stories from the previous performer. The stories come from the oral sources of his predecessors. In his performances, the performer does not use the raw text (script) as the medium of the dialogue, but derives the story solely from his memory. That's why each story can have many variations. This phenomenon differs from the modern form of drama performance, which uses the standard text as dialogue memorized by the actors.

This study aims to further knowledge of oral tradition by investigating characteristics of the orality of Panji tales. This research is essential to do for several reasons. First, an oral product handed down by word of mouth will be lost if not recorded. Second, since no standard text exists, each performance allows for a re-creation process, which was, however, overlooked in previous research. Third, although there have been earlier studies

\*In the Javanese language this means a housing complex with a large enough area provided for learning and teaching specific knowledge and skills, for example, self-defense, music, dance, and so on.

\*\*The term *lakon* in Javanese culture is the equivalent of the word "drama" from the Western tradition.

on mask puppet shows, such research has centered on the structural and semiotic aspects of the performance, while the tale has been overlooked. Fourth, a new perspective on this phenomenon can be used to preserve and develop cultural tourism.

### The Story of Panji and padepokan in Malang

The relationship between Panji Story and performing arts, especially drama-dance, in the East Java region has been very long. Since the collapse of the kingdoms in Central Java, in the 10th–11th centuries AD, a performance art known as *rakēt* has emerged in East Java (Soedarsono, 1990: 5). Unlike the *wayang wong*, which performs the stories of Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, *rakēt* features the Panji Story. *Rakēt* is another name for *gambuh* in Bali (Robson, 1971: 33). In fact, in *Nāgarakērtāgama*, written by Mpu Prapanca, it is stated that King Hayamwuruk and his father (Kertawardhana) often participated in *rakēt* performances at court (Soedarsono, 1990: 7). This provides evidence that *rakēt*, or mask dance, was popular among the nobility at the time. However, mask performance art in East Java, initially royal, has evolved into folk art along the way (Sumintarsih et al., 2012: 27). The growth of Mask Puppet performances in the region ended with the fall of the Majapahit Kingdom and the relocation of the kingdom's center to Demak, Central Java. One of the reasons is that the Demak Kingdom developed a culture with an Islamic style. Nevertheless, the development of masks in the period of the Islamic kingdoms did not stop. Sunan Kalijaga is known as the creator of mask shows (Sumarsam, 2003: 47; Sumintarsih et al., 2012: 27). It explains the popularity of mask shows nowadays, particularly after Islamization in Java.

Mask Puppet Show is claimed to have first arisen in Malang in the early 20th century AD. The Regent of Malang at that time, Suryo Adi Ningrat, wrote that in 1928, the development of masks in the Malang Regency was very rapid. Many famous players come from Pucangsanga Village, Tumpang District (Hidajat, 2008: 17–18). The source of evidence on the development of mask puppet show in Malang comes from Pigeaud (1938: 79–158). This is a dramatic performance acted by dancers wearing masks, moving along a storyline narrated by a *dalang*\*. The *dalang* acts as the story's composer and

the characters' narrator. Dancers react to anything the *dalang* says. Apart from the aesthetics of the dance, this performance has a significant literary element.

This performance has many different names. Some refer to it as *Topeng Dhalang* (Dalang Mask) (Timoer, 1979: 1), *Drama-Tari Wayang Topeng* (Drama-Dance of Puppet Mask Show) (Supriyanto, Pramono, 1997: 1–8), or *Wayang Topeng Malang* (Malang Mask Puppet Show) (Hidajat, 2008: 29). In the local community, this performance is known as *Topeng Panji* (the Panji Mask), which is followed by the name of the *padepokan*, such as “Topeng Panji Jabung” (Panji Mask of Jabung) or “Topeng Panji Kedhungmangga” (Panji Mask of Kedhungmangga) (Timoer, 1979: 1–4). Malang residents refer to this show as the Panji Mask Show, since it incorporates the Panji narrative into each performance.

Throughout the research that has been done on the history of the development of the Mask Puppet Show in Malang, there is still no recent research that can refute the existence of the figure named Reni, a pioneer of this performance (Hidajat, 2008: 17–18; Murgiyanto, Munardi, 1979: 14; Sumintarsih et al., 2012: 28; Supriyanto, 1994: 6; Supriyanto, Pramono, 1997: 5). Reni was a famous *dalang*, mask engraver, and skilled dancer. He was from Polowijen village. Reni was an employee of the Malang Regency Office, led by the Regent of Malang named Suryo Adi Ningrat, who ruled from 1898 to 1934 (Supriyanto, Pramono, 1997: 6). With his fame as a mask artist, a plantation head, named Mr. Peng, invited him to perform a mask puppet show. Along with its development, the famous mask puppet association in Malang was born in Pucangsongo village, covered in the Tumpang regency. According to Soleh Adi Pramono, the informant, contemporaneously with Reni there lived a man named Ruminten, who came from the Pucangsongo village. It is believed that the mask puppet shows originated in that village in the early 20th century. Ruminten, who was a Mpu Kris (*kris* ‘dagger maker’), a puppet master, and a mask maker, requested Rusman from the Kemulan village to become a masked puppet dance instructor (Ibid.: 6–7). The informant confirmed this statement: “Rusman, who came from Kemulan Hamlet, Tulus Ayu village, is the grandfather of Ki Soleh Adi Pramono”. S.M. Murgiyanto and A.M. Munardi (1979: 13) state that “Rusman is also known as Tirto”. This is confirmed by the informant, who added that Rusman was also known as Tir. In Javanese culture, it is expected that parents be called a name based on the name of their first child. Mr. Rusman had a child named Tirtonoto. Hence, he was also addressed as Pak Tirto or Grandpa Tir.

During his lifetime, Mr. Tirto did not only teach his artistic skills to his son, but also to many other people. It is known that almost every mask puppet figure in Malang has dealt with him, such as Mr. Kangsen and his father from Jabung village, Mr. Samud from Pucangsanga

\*A person who plays and tells a story on stage. However, the task of a *dalang* is not only related to performance. He also has to execute rituals that are said to be a medium for removing bad luck from the cured person. In Javanese society, *dalang* is also believed to have supernatural powers that can help cure magical ailments.



village, Mr. Rakhim from Glagahdawa village, Mr. Sapari from Jatiguwi village, and Mr. Kiman (Karimun's Father) from Kedungmangga village (Ibid.). Therefore, it can be understood that right up to the present, there are mask puppet art *padepokans* in these areas.

### The composition of Panji Story: past and present

The Birth of Panji story, staged in the Mask Puppet show, is a piece of oral tradition. The plot and dialogues of the characters in the show are based on the utterances of performer, who acts as the narrator and dialogue speaker for the characters in the story. The *dalang* is a crucial figure who governs everything relating to the show (see Figure). If we look at this fact, it can be seen that the *dalang* is the story's creator, constantly recreating it in performance. This view differs from those that have existed so far, for example in the folkloristic discipline, which considers a story as a communal product. Here, communal is the *pakem* (convention), while the aspect of creating performances is individual. The convention relates to the rules regarding the course of the performance, not about the storyline. *Dalang* string storylines are based on their memory and interpretation of a story. There is creativity in creating a story. This fact further confirms Finnegan's conclusion (1991: 10–12; 2012: 117) that oral tradition is a product of individuals who are part of society.

The Birth of Panji performance, which was played at Mangun Dharma *padepokan*, was composed and performed by Ki Soleh Adi Pramono. He was the performer and owner of Mangun Dharma. He had a vital role as a *dalang*, not only as a composer of the stories but also responsible for the entire performance. Story composition is carried out only by the *dalang* without interference from others.

The storyline used in the show remains the same from the past to the present. The differences can be caused by external factors, such as the education and technology obtained by the *dalang*. In the past, the process of composing a story was carried out without using tools such as the order of the performer's play written on a piece of paper. According to the informant, many *dalangs* are *wuto sastra* (cannot read and write). The show has only a few tools, such as loudspeakers and other electronic devices. In the current context, there are various advances in the story-creation process: for example, the inclusion of characters in the show that did not exist before, such as the masks of an elephant, a striped tree frog, and a dragon.

Comparing the development of the story's composition from the past to the present, it can be seen that no standard form is considered the final text. It is possible to have many narrative versions under the same title. The tale is created both before and during the show. This finding enriches our knowledge about the composition of oral tradition, apart from its being created during performances



Performance of the Panji Story at the Malang Mask Puppet Show.

(Lord, 1971: 17), or memorized (Andrewjezki, Lewis, 1964: 45–46; Johnson, 1979).

Before the performance, the *dalang* will assign the sequence of the play to the puppets so that they remember the order in which they act. This is significant for the act, since it is connected to the setting of the location, the characters, and the dance steps planned for the performance. On the other hand, the elements of the tale or language utilized are generated spontaneously based on the *dalang's* memories while the performance is in process. The story, composed by the *dalang*, is followed by the movements of the puppets performing in the show. Therefore, the story played in one show will never be the same as the other.

The *dalang's* ability to compose a narrative throughout the show is dependent on the circumstance and duration of the performance. As mentioned above, the text evolves and changes with each performance. Based on the three data points on the performance of Panji Story collected in three distinct scenarios and obtained in different situations, it can be shown that the composition of the story performed by the *dalang* varies. In the most complete story, there are 19 characters and a lot of events. In the two other stories, some of these are omitted. During the show, the *dalang* is bound by the timeframe, which limits the performance. In the second story, there are only nine characters. Even less of them (six) are in the story of an everyday situation. The differences can also be seen in the story-shaping structure used by the *dalang* to fill in each event he will stage. In each show with a different context, the *dalang* will always create a new story. Each of them is a reworked version of the main tale.

The story created by the performer belongs to the performer. However, the title and storyline can be used by anyone. Nevertheless, the audience recognizes each performer's style in telling the story. The uniqueness of Javanese culture is that the *dalang's* creativity is solely related to storytelling, while the title and order of the plot become public property.

### The transmission of Panji Story

Transmission is one of the essential aspects of oral tradition research, which determines the difference between written literature and oral tradition (Finnegan, 1992: 106–108; Lord, 1971: 129, 137). Oral tradition is passed down orally through word of mouth. There is only a process of telling stories and listening without help from other media, such as writing. Although the issue of this matter has received much attention, the way the inheritance of the tradition is carried out is still a question, considering that each culture has its own conventions. Hence, Finnegan (1979: 52) states: “There

is no single process in oral transmission applicable to any type of literature”.

The Panji story used in the Mask Puppet Show is a story that comes from oral tradition. Therefore, the characteristics possessed by this oral text are different from the written version of Panji Story. As oral tradition, the story comes from the storyteller's memory. He has also obtained, or learned, stories verbally by listening to people who had told him, or remembering them from seeing a performance. The play Birth of Panji, staged in the Mask Puppet Show, was the creation of the Ki Soleh Adi Pramono. The Story is oral tradition created and performed orally. As a dance-drama performance, the role of a *dalang* as a composer and a storyteller is fundamental. Therefore, it is very important how a *dalang* acquires a story.

The only way of transmitting the Panji Story is by *nyantrik*—a traditional method of learning something in Javanese culture. Culturally, *nyantrik* is more than just acquiring skills from others, as in formal education. *Nyantrik* is a service rendered to a teacher in exchange for the skills he has provided. Furthermore, the *nyantrik* is linked to supernatural aspects. The teacher's evaluation of his pupils (*cantrik*) is tied to supernatural concerns. A *cantrik* will help with any work. If the teacher is a farmer, he will help with the work in the fields, and when the show is held, he brings the teacher's equipment. After a few years, he is tested.

There are no restrictions on the age or religion professed by a *cantrik*. People of any religion, race, or age can learn. During *nyantrik*, several practices must be done. All the ordinances and rituals performed during *nyantrik* are based on Javanese ordinances, not on Islamic ordinances. During the birthday, the *cantrik* is told to do the *tirakats* (fasting). Fasting for Javanese people had become a part of life; even before Islam entered the Land of Java, “fasting traditions” already existed with various purposes (Yana, 2010: 31). Fasting is considered a medium that can be used to connect with supernatural forces. The purpose of fasting is to strengthen the mind and influence the strength of the universe by practicing concern or feeling mental pain in the form of preventing physiological needs (Haryanto, 2013: 25). It is believed that a man is able to master the power of the universe to draw closer to nature and the Almighty.

There are two models to be *dalang*: the real (hereditary) *dalang*, and the *poncobuwono* (ordinary) *dalang*, not of *dalang* descent. Our informant is a real *dalang* because, on the basis of his lineage, his father (Mr. Sapari) was a *dalang*, and his mother (Mrs. Siami) comes from a family of shadow puppet masters in Blitar.

Typically, the distinction between real *dalang* and ordinary *dalang* is based on their authorization to perform puppetry. According to the informant's experience, an ordinary *dalang* can perform *pangruwatan* (a ritual

ceremony in Javanese culture aimed at removing evil or saving something from a nuisance) as long as he is deemed capable. But first, he must do *ngelakoni* (the conditions that must be done with Javanese *tirakat*). The informant said there was once someone, not from the descendants of the *dalang*, who wanted to be a *dalang*. However, eventually, it no longer worked. He stopped halfway and got married. There is a belief that the one with the right to do *pangruwatan* is the real *dalang*. Therefore, the *pangruwatan* is called the *pangruwatan* of the real *dalang*. On the other hand, there is a belief that God will always produce *dalang* through the cycle of descent.

The requirements for becoming a *dalang* are not limited by one's bloodline alone. The transmission process is based on a person's intention and earnestness to become a puppet master. A *dalang* is not only required to be able to master the procedures for the performance: he must master the dance, the rules, and many plays of a performance. That is, he has to learn many stories as his performance material. The most important thing is to master all kinds of Panji Stories, considering that exactly this play is performed in the mask puppet show.

### Conclusions

Previous research has shown that the Panji Story is a classic story of Javanese people that developed in the Majapahit period. Although it is recorded in written form, the Mask Puppet Show is based on an oral tradition. The nature of the *dalang*'s performance does not use the raw text (script) as the medium of the dialogue; he speaks aloud. The *dalang* tells the story in his show based solely on aspects of his memory. Panji Story as used in the mask puppet show is "fluid", with several variations and innovations in the form of *sanggitan* (a ritual of holding back one's passions to cultivate one's mind). Based on temporal and stage considerations, there are advances in which the performance's duration is not a whole night but several hours, and stage changes formerly performed in the courtroom are now performed on stage. In the Birth of Panji stage, it is found that the story is composed orally, not only before but also during the performance. In the process of composing the story, it was found that several contexts influenced the *dalang*, namely the situation and the length of the performance. In passing on this oral tradition, the mode of transmission used is *nyantrik*—the traditional way of acquiring knowledge. There are two types of inheritance: real *dalang* and ordinary *dalang*.

This research is limited to one type of Panji Story in one traditional performance. More comprehensive research needs to be done into other types of Panji stories, such as fairy tales or other types of Panji Story

plays on other traditional performances. Research on the revitalization of performances, dance aesthetics, the history of the development of Panji Story in mask puppet performances, and efforts to preserve traditional arts need to be carried out.

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