

Reog and Its Possession in Preserving Cultural Identity in Central Java, Indonesia

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Abstract. This research aimed to show Reog and its possessions that may occur during the performance as a cultural heritage in Indonesia. Only a few people know what exactly happens which leads people to have misconception about this cultural identity. It seems to be a need to figure out about it. The research focused to show the real possession occurs including what the players do, see, and feel during the performance. This study was conducted in Pojoksari, Ambarawa, Central Java. The qualitative data was gained through interviews and observation while the questionnaire utilized was used for triangulating the data from interviews. The researcher constructed the questions for both interviews and questionnaire after the observations. The interview was conducted to the players, shaman, and the music players while the questionnaire was given to the remaining members. The result revealed that this group has never had made-up possessions. Besides, during the state of being possessed, the players tend to feel and see nothing and they usually move uncontrollably. After the performance, in fact, they feel dizzy and pain all over their body. Some requirements are fundamental to perform Reog safely such as shaman, players, music, and sesajen. This research is expected to bring contribution to other researchers to explore as no detail study was conducted on this related topic.

Keywords: Reog, possession, performance art, cultural identity.

1 Introduction

A lot of people might have heard about the term Reog but only a few of them do understand what it is. Reog is a traditional performing art that comes from Javanese that displays the combination of arts in the form of dance and mysticism. Reog is a traditional performance originally from Ponorogo that uses physical movements and is still very strong with mystical things [1]. Reog has many names in different regions in Indonesia, such as Jaran Kepang, Jaranan, Jathilan, Kuda Lumping, Jaran Eblek, and Reog. Reog is also famous in many names such as Ebeg, Sang Hyang Jaran, Ebleg, and also Kuda Kepang [2]. In Ambarawa, people usually refer Reog performance as Kuda Lumping and Jaran Kepang.

Historically, Kuda Lumping was performed as a ritual in spreading Islam in Ambarawa, Central Java. This performance has been conducted regularly as a part of *bersih desa* or village

purification. Jaran Kepang or Kuda Lumping has been a part of the annual ritual of village purification [3]. Further, the performance of Kuda Lumping has a few functions namely as a sacred ritual in village purification, entertainment, and also performance [4]. Hereby, the term sacred ritual refers to the magical ritual that is always undergone aiming to purify and cleanse the village from the dangers and other kinds of disasters. In fact, in Pojoksari, Ambarawa, people cannot estimate when the rituals will be since each village sets its own time for conducting it. Generally, the ritual will start in the early morning in the village founder's grave followed by some prayers to the ancestors as well as the incense provided. Having completed these rituals beforehand, the Kuda Lumping performance is held.

In Kuda Lumping performance, there are two parts namely the opening dance and the core performance. There are three opening dances conducted before the core performance. The first one is performed by 6 to 8 men wearing black costumes and red make-up who represent the brave lions. They do the Jathilan or Jaran Kepang dance. The term Jathilan is derived from two Javanese words namely Jan which means really and Thil-thilan which means moves a lot. The second one is performed by 6 women wearing colorful costumes with bamboos horses. These bamboo horses are made of woven bamboo or kepeng that is cut in the shape of horses with no legs, painted in colorful paint, and decorated with bells and beads [5]. These women will have graceful and orderly movements during the performance. The last opening dance is usually done by some children who perform the act of Ganongan. In modern Reog performance, there is a sequence of events consisting of two to three opening dances before the core performance [6]. He further adds that during the core performance of Reog or Kuda Lumping performance, possession sometimes occurs.

Possession refers to the condition where there will be spiritual powers or spirit calling which will make the people have an altered state of consciousness. This state of trance occurs when the spirit is called from the immaterial world [5]. Trance or possession usually shows a temporary loss of self-identity whereas the one getting possessed shows another personality and supernatural powers [7]. When it happens, people will have no control over their mental or physical functions as the spirit has taken over the human host [8]. This spirit possession could be the ancestral spirits, local deities, animal spirits, or other spirits. Sometimes in some performances, animal or place spirits (demit) are invited since they are the lowest grade of spirits which are easiest to be taken out while in some other cases, Muslim spirits or djinn have been asking to be invited during the performance [9]. When people are possessed, the spirit will dominate their minds in doing any risky actions during the performance [10]. Thus, it can be concluded that possession is seen as a belief where the spirit does some activities or actions such as eating glasses and razors, breaking coconut using their teeth, licking fire, drinking flowery water, and other extreme activities with no control of people whose bodies are taken over during the performance.

The core part of Reog performance is the moment when the players will get possessed. In order to make Reog or Kuda Lumping performance work properly, there are some requirements that people need to prepare and fulfill as follows.

1.1 Shaman

One of the most fundamental elements to exist in Reog performance is shaman or people usually refer as pawang. Pawang is sometimes also called as dukun who has full control of the performance. Pawang is someone who is actually a ritual practitioner who is spiritually strong and powerful and he usually spells specific mantras in order to keep the performance working well [11]. The duties of this shaman are to invite the spirit so that this spirit can enter the players' bodies to entertain the audiences and to ensure that the spirit can leave the body right after the performance.

In order to become a qualified pawang, someone needs to have special calling during his meditation [5]. However, most of the people who have the label as pawang usually those who used to be dancers who have been participating in the Reog performances for years and they usually have higher social status than the dancers [12]. For some cases, pawang also works as the owner of the properties such as costumes and musical instruments used in Reog performance. Unless there is shaman, a Reog performance will be too risky to be conducted because there will be no person responsible for protecting the players or dancers from the spirit who does not want to leave the body.

All shamans always wear black costumes and also attributes during the Reog performance. It has been a fact that in some areas where Reog performance is held, the only person allowed to wear black is the shaman himself. Black color represents confidence and also calmness, thus, people who like doing meditation tend to put on black color. Besides, the use of black attributes for the shaman is to show that he has higher level of skills than those who wear colorful or random attributes.

Before performing Kuda Lumping performance, shamans need to do fasting [13]. They usually do fasting and only consume rice and mineral water a day before the performance. This fasting has the aim of granting wishes especially to ask for protection for the upcoming performance from the evil spirit which can harm the safety of the group members.

1.2 The music

Reog performance is usually conducted to celebrate the annual ritual of village purification, marriage, or even circumcision [14]. Therefore, they have a wide range of options of songs to opt for. However, most of the songs used are traditional Indonesian songs such as Lir Ilir, Gambuh, Manyar Sewu, Kagok Semarang, and Slompret-Slompret. Slompret-Slompret is highly believed to attract and invite the spirit as it has powerful energy through its monotonous rhythm and tempo [13].

Music is another vital element in Reog performance since it features a wide range of frequencies from the very high to the very low with monotone drum beat and it is continuously sounded with its sudden changes [9]. Furthermore, it usually helps the players to feel dizzy and the spirit has shown its sign to enter the body. The music will start to change when the players are in the possession state. Manyar Sewu is generally chosen as the background of the closing part where the shaman will take out the spirit from the players' body [13]. This song will be on repeat until the players who get possessed regain their consciousness.

1.3 The players

The players or dancers in Reog performance can be anyone as participating in this performance does not require proper training [11]. It does not even care about gender or age in order to be able to be part of the community. In conducting Reog performance, there should be around 8 to 15 players based on the theme of occasions.

Similar to the shaman, players also need to do fasting. It is highly believed that fasting helps them not to feel pain after eating glasses or razor and licking fire. Unless they do fasting, they are usually unable to eat or drink because their throat will be very painful. Besides, players must not touch anything when they want to be possessed because their body that will be used by the spirit needs to be clean [13].

1.4 *Sesajen*

Lastly, preparing *sesajen* is a must when they want the possession in Reog performance ends safely. The shaman usually prepares flowers, incense, water, and also coffee. The incense is differentiated based on the spirit that is going to possess the body [13]. As the shaman cannot predict the spirit that will possess the body, he usually provides Javanese and Chinese incense. These incense and flowers are used to invite the spirit while the water and coffee are used to serve them during the performance. The flowers provided are the combination of roses, kanthil flower, and also cananga flowers. In Java people usually refer this combination of flowers as *bunga awur* or sprinkling flowers. Unless all of the *sesajen* is fulfilled, there will never be any possessions occur during the performance.

In brief, Reog performance and its possession have been seen as one of the cultural identities that Indonesia has. Culture is a complex whole that encompasses beliefs, knowledge, language, arts, custom, morals, law, and other elements that describe a society [15]. Reog performance combines beliefs, arts, language, and also music to be a tradition that becomes something to describe Indonesia. Furthermore, it belongs to one as it has specific role for not only socially but also ritually. The ritual has shaped the locals to maintain this performance as one of the Indonesian traditions to be conducted regularly. The locals do not only work as audiences who enjoy the entertainment but also those who keep the ritual occur. In social practices, Reog performance has helped the local communities to deliver their pray and hopes to God [16].

People might consider that possession is mostly made-up. Due to some reasons, sometimes there are no dancers whose body are able to be entered by the spirit. However, the performance still needed to be carried out. Therefore, this made-up possession can be another way to amuse the audiences without telling the truth. This paper aims at revealing the truth whether real possession exists in Pojoksari, Ambarawa, Central Java and what the players experience during the Reog performance. As Reog performance has to be inherited hereditarily and there have not been any

deeper and detail researches about it, there is a need to conduct this research deeper so that there will be no misconception about this cultural identity.

2 Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative narrative inquiry research approach. The instruments used in this paper were observation, interview, and library research. The observation was done thrice when Reog performance took place in Pojoksari, Ambarawa in 2020 and 2021. The researcher chose this Reog group because most of the members are between 16 to 25 years old except the shaman. The information was gained through interview to get deeper information from the participants. The informants were three players or dancers, two music players, and a shaman. All of them were males. In this study, the participants retold their experiences being the part of Reog performances in Pojoksari, Ambarawa. This enabled them to share their experience, reveal the truth, and highlight the construction of social reality. Further, library research was used to gain the in-depth information related to Reog performance in Central Java. Moreover, questionnaire given to 10 remaining Reog group members was used to triangulate the data obtained. It was applied by using dichotomous questions and the participants ticked the right answer based on their experience. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants through Google Forms. The questions for both questionnaire and interview were made based on the conditions after the observation. The result of the questionnaire was presented in percentage.

3 Results and Discussion

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NO	STATEMENT	Resp.	YES	%	NO	%
1	I am a Reog member called Sanggar Manunggal Among Budaya.	10	10	100%	0	0%
2	I have ever seen a real possession occurred in Reog performances I participated.	10	9	90%	1	10%
3	I have ever seen a made-up possession occurred in Reog performances I took part.	10	0	0%	10	100%
4	I believe that possession does exist.	10	8	80%	2	20%
5	I have ever got possessed while having a Reog performance.	10	4	40%	6	60%
6	Players who get possessed always have no control over their body movement.	10	9	90%	1	10%
7	Players who get possessed during the performance can remember what they have done in the state of possession.	10	0	0%	10	100%
8	Players who get possessed during the performance feel dizzy afterwards.	10	10	100%	0	0%
9	Players who get possessed during the performance feel pain all over their body afterwards.	10	9	90%	1	10%
10	Players who get possessed during the performance feel nothing while doing risky attractions.	10	8	80%	2	20%
11	Players who get possessed during the performance usually eat razors, dance uncontrollably, lick fire, and other risky attractions.	10	8	80%	2	20%
12	Players who get possessed during the performance could not see anything in the state of possession.	10	7	70%	3	30%
13	Someone who get possessed during the performance will be monitored by shaman.	10	10	100%	0	0%
14	All people can get possessed during the performance.	10	0	0%	10	100%
15	One of the requirements to get possessed is that the players have to do fasting.	10	7	70%	3	30%
16	Shaman is one of the fundamental requirements to provide in a Reog performance to perform perfectly and safely.	10	10	100%	0	0%

Figure 1. General finding of questionnaire result.

During the performance, generally there are many things that the players feel, see, and do when they are possessed. The writer did some interviews to two out of three players who usually get possessed, Mr. BS and Mr. AK, one of them willingly let himself to be possessed while the other one ever tried to prevent himself from being possessed. The one who got possessed willingly spends no time in losing his consciousness. On the other hand, the one who used to prevent himself from being possessed mentioned that he had no ability to keep their body in the conscious state. Further, he mentioned that he kept listening to the musical instrument especially gamelan and the sound kept echoing in his head. He told the writer that he was once away from his hometown when the Reog performance is annually held which made him unable to participate in the performance. When he was doing his job elsewhere, he could not control himself from moving uncontrollably. He added that his hands started shaking then he started to lose control and move uncontrollably. By the time he was possessed, he could not remember doing things that he did in his unconscious state. When they have regained their consciousness, they will not know what actions they have done including eating glass or razors, licking fire, or breaking roof tiles using their heads. They usually get exhausted and drained and physically they will experience pain all over their body, especially their head. It was proven from the questionnaire in statement 7 and 10. These two statements showed most respondents believed that players who get possessed during the performance usually cannot remember what they do in their unconscious state. Besides, the possessed players tend to feel nothing when doing risky attractions. Furthermore, statement 8 and 9 in the questionnaire showed that nearly all respondents agreed that after the performance, players feel pain all over their body and dizzy

for a day. This result goes the same with the theory that highlights the inability for these possessed Reog players to remember and to feel pain during the performance meanwhile for the post performance they feel dizzy and pain all over their body [17]. Mr. BS usually does a week of fasting and during the performance, he brings an heirloom near him to prevent him not to feel any pain while doing risky attractions. Unless he does fasting before the performance, he is unable to do activities normally. Moreover, he added, “Pernah coba atraksi makan silet tanpa puasa, organ dalamnya perih sakit sampai mau makan takut” [I ever tried doing attraction of eating razor without doing fasting and I felt like my internal organ stung which made me afraid of eating]. Having understood this fact, they always do fasting at least a week before the performance. In the questionnaire in statement 15, 70% respondents agreed that shaman becomes one of the important requirements to provide in a Reog performance. It is in line with the theory claimed that in a Reog performance, the presence of a shaman is a must [17].

Losing their consciousness while being possessed, they said that it was more like sleeping without dreaming of anything. They will fall asleep, however, they do not really sleep. They usually see nothing when they experience the possession. Everything turns to black and they start to lose control. They will start to move and dance in disorderly movement. They cannot think of and decide anything in their normal sense. In fact, it cannot be said as totally sleeping because their sense of hearing still works normally. Mr. AK mentioned that his sense of hearing becomes sharpened. During his unconscious state, he has the ability to listen to even the smallest tune in the song played during the performance. He further stated that his sense of sight will be unable to be used for a while, yet his sense of sight will be sharpened. It was also proven from the questionnaire in statement 12 which showed that most respondents believed that the players who get possessed could not see anything in the state of possession. This result proves the theory which underlines the inability to see for someone who is being possessed during Reog performance [17].

Lastly, during the possession in Reog performance, there are many things that the players will do. This is when the role of shaman is highly fundamental as he has to observe each movement of the players who get possessed, protect them, and ensure that they do not hurt the audiences. The shaman usually provokes the players mostly to do some risky attractions and dance or move uncontrollably. Hence, the shaman will give code to the music players to change the tone and beat of the music so that the spirit can take over the body and perform in front of a lot of people. The shaman, Mr. LS, described some activities that players who get possessed usually do during the Reog performance. Basically, they will start to move their body uncontrollably for few minutes. Later on, some of them might have some changes emotionally. They will cry out loud and get mad for no reasons. Their anger will keep elevating from time to time. Furthermore, they will ask some challenges to be conducted. It could be licking fire, stepping on the glasses, eating glass or razor, and hitting their head using roof tiles. The most popular attractions they do are eating razors and hitting head by using roof tiles. Mr. AK further explained that a tiger spirit once possessed him during the performance. He would crawl, growl, and stare at others exactly just like how a tiger looks at their preys. In fact, this spirit did not harm the audience since it was only interested in being part of the performance. From the questionnaire in statement 11, it was clear that 80% respondents agreed that players who get possessed during the performance usually eat razor, dance uncontrollably, lick fire, and do other risky attractions. Thus, it proves the previous findings which state that the possessed players usually dance based on their own willing and sometimes they improve their dance [17] [18].

As a matter of fact, possession has been something that audiences wait for in the performance. Probably there might be some communities that are unable to provide the possession because neither the shaman is strong enough nor the players who have the ability to get possessed are available. Therefore, made-up possession sometimes becomes their last option to pick unless they have all the requirements ready. In fact, in Sanggar Among Manunggal Budoyo, they never do made-up possession. When the requests require them to do the possession, they do real possession. From the result of the questionnaire, in statement 2 and 3 showed that nearly all respondents believed that they have never seen a made-up possession shown during the performance. It goes the same with the finding proposed that made-up possession rarely occurs these days [18].

Mr. LS also mentioned that he once experienced possession that was very hard to ask the spirit to leave. It was around 5 years ago when the sesajen that the host prepared was not complete. The sesajen provided was flowers, incense, water, coffee, and Javanese eggs. The host might have forgotten to provide cigarette and Javanese traditional snacks. Due to the incompleteness of the sesajen, the spirit became angry, mad, and it did not want to leave the body. It took a few hours for him to take the spirit out of the body forcibly. From that day on, they never forget to prepare cigarette, Javanese traditional snacks, and other sesajen needed for every Reog performance. Furthermore, shaman is one of the fundamental elements to have in a Reog performance. He has the biggest responsibilities to handle in every Reog performance held. As seen in the result of the questionnaire in statement 15, players who are willing to let their body to be possessed had to do fasting beforehand. This finding is similar to the previous study that highlights the importance of fasting for the players who are going to be possessed in the Reog performance [17].

4 Conclusion

In order to Reog performance to occur, there are some requirements to fulfill such as flowers, Javanese or Chinese incense, water, coffee, Javanese eggs, cigarettes, and also Javanese traditional snacks. Besides, shaman, players, and also the music also put their equal contributions in the performance. Unless one of these is fulfilled, the possession in Reog performance is not going to occur. In the state of possession, players usually experience many things including what they feel, what they see, and also what they do. Being possessed hinders the players to have the ability to control their body and their mind. It makes them unable to make decision wisely. In contrast, they will prefer doing the risky attractions. During this state of unconsciousness, the players could not see, feel, and remember anything. However, their sense of hearing is sharpened even they could listen to the smallest tune in the music played during the moment of being possessed. As there are many spirits that can get into the body, such as local spirit or animal spirits, the dancers show and act differently according to the spirit that possessed them. For example, when the animal spirit possessed the body of the player, he will act and move like a tiger. In fact, these spirits have not harmed the audiences so far as they want to be a part of the performance that amuses and entertains the audiences. Reog performance in Pojoksari, Ambarawa never shows made-up possession as they believe that they could handle it by providing all the sesajen needed through the power of the shaman as well. Reog performance that is still conducted regularly in Central Java especially Ambarawa brings the combination of

arts, language, knowledge, and also belief that describe how Indonesia has these complex elements as a part of their cultural identity they need to preserve.

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