

Technology Touch in The Revitalization of Mask Puppet Performance

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**TECHNOLOGY TOUCH IN THE REVITALIZATION OF MASK
PUPPET PERFORMANCE**

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ABSTRACT

Mask Puppet (then called by Wayang topeng) is a traditional performing art that is struggling to survive in the present day. Developments in technology have caused a decline in the existence of a number of traditional arts, including wayang topeng. The revitalization of wayang topeng is urgently needed, specifically for Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang. Several stages of revitalization have already been implemented, beginning with the reconstruction of its original form, development of the story structure, development of the players, and development of the form of the performance, using a touch of technology. The goal of this article is to analyze the presence of technology in the revitalization of the performance of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang. The methods used are observation, interviewing, and documentation, together with the revitalization of wayang topeng performance. The data analysis is carried out by organizing the data, reading and describing the text, and interpreting and presenting the data. Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang is once again becoming more widely known in the Jombang community. Wayang topeng, which was originally performed in an open arena on mats made from woven pandan leaves, has been developed through its revitalization into a form performed on a stage. Its artistic packaging has produced a new revitalized form of wayang topeng performance. The gamelan instruments are arranged as a backdrop to the performance, complete with other supporting elements such as stage layout and lighting techniques, which when combined with the natural conditions of Jatiduwur village, make the performance of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur highly attractive to the Jatiduwur community. The touch of artistic technology enhances the treatment of the *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* story which is performed by children in a new form of Wayang Topeng Jombang performance. It can therefore be concluded that technology is not the cause of the disappearance of traditional art forms such as wayang topeng but on the contrary can support its existence.

Keywords: Technology, Revitalization, Performance, Wayang Topeng

1. Introduction

In the past, the existence of traditional arts was a basic requirement for the life of communities of stakeholders. Traditional arts were created by human beings to fulfil their own needs, as a medium for worship. Traditional arts were presented as an expression of gratitude for health, an abundant harvest, and so on. Due to advances in science, which taught people to think and use logic, developments in human civilization led to a decline in the belief that art could be used as a medium for worship. As a result, art was no longer viewed as a primary need in people's lives but rather as a form of entertainment. At this point in time, traditional arts started to become much further removed from people's lives, and this led to the gradually disappearance of numerous traditional art forms.

The traditional art of mask performance, or topeng, has been in existence since primitive times. Topeng performance was an important requirement for worship in primitive communities. Take, for instance, Balinese topeng, as described by I Made Bandem:

"Masks may have been used in Bali since pre-Hindu times, and fortunately many examples of these masks are still kept alive today by the vital Hindu religion. The primitive berutuk mask of Trunyan village near Lake Batur is quite similar in style to masks found on other islands in the Indonesia archipelago" (Bandem, 2001).

In Java, wayang topeng is a traditional performing art that is believed to have existed since the pre-Islamic era. Pigeaud writes about the performance of wayang topeng from Demak, which subsequently spread to East Java and West Java and developed in villages. In general, the performance of wayang topeng in villages functioned as a part of traditional ceremonies such as weddings, village cleansing rituals, and so on (Pigeaud, in Soedarsono 2011). This was

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how the performance of wayang topeng, a traditional art form, was used by communities as a ritual medium, thus giving it an important role in the community.

Since the 20th century, the performance of wayang topeng became increasingly rare. The emergence of modern art forms pushed aside wayang topeng so that it was no longer needed by the community. This became even more apparent in the 21st century, the era of globalization, in which wayang topeng all but disappeared. One example of wayang topeng in East Java, which experienced this condition of near-extinction, is Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur in the Jombang Regency. It is estimated that this form of wayang topeng reached the height of its popularity between the 1870s and 1950s, and subsequently disappeared until the 1990s. In 1993, it was studied as the subject of a student dissertation. Just as Pigeaud explains, the performance of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur developed in the village of Jatiduwur in the District of Kesamben in the Jombang Regency, as a folk performance that served as a ritual for fulfilling personal vows or *nadzar* (Yanuartuti, 2015).

As a folk performing art, wayang topeng was performed outside people's homes, on mats of woven pandan leaves, and enjoyed by village audiences. Performances took place during the daytime, and the main element of the performance was the story told by the puppeteer, or *dalang*, accompanied by dancers who visualized the story through their movements, in accordance with the characters they were portraying. Other artistic elements such as costumes were not yet important (dancers wore their own everyday clothes), except for the ornamental headpieces (*jamang*) and wing-like ornaments (*probo*) used to distinguish the characters of kings from those of soldiers. The performance of this art showed that its main element was its function as a ritual medium, presented through its story. Since only the ritual element was considered important, the art of wayang topeng disappeared when the lifestyle of the community began to develop in a more modern direction.

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A number of artists from Jombang, recognizing the importance of the values of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur, attempted to carry out a process of revitalization. This involved reconstructing or reviving the original form of the performance but with the additional touch of costumes, similar to those used in the performance of the stage art wayang wong. The reconstruction process was successful and several performances were held by the Jombang Tourism and Culture Office in a number of places, including the Cak Durasim building in Surabaya and also in Taman Mini. However, the continued existence of wayang topeng proved unstable because nobody was interested in commissioning any further performances. This was due to the fact that the performers of this revitalized form of wayang topeng were not all members of the original Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur group, since many of the original performers were too old to take part. It was no surprise, therefore, that within 2 or 3 years there was once again a vacuum in the performance of wayang topeng.

If we look at the existence of wayang topeng, is it true to say that its decline is due only to developments in technology? The researcher holds the assumption that rebuilding the existence of a traditional art such as wayang topeng is a complex matter. This means that revitalization cannot guarantee the sustainability of the existence of a traditional performing art if it is only supported by a single element, such as becoming a government requirement. Revitalization must pay attention to the needs of today's community and its surrounding culture, as well as taking into consideration the life of the supporting community or art group itself. Therefore, in this age of technological developments, the element of global cultural development (technology) can be chosen as an approach to be used in the revitalization of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang, as a way of reviving the interest of the community. In addition, the regeneration of players is a step that is needed to rebuild the wayang topeng community.

2. Art Technology

An understanding of art and technology can be gained through the word *techne*. *Techne* is the ability to make or do something with a correct and proper understanding of its principles. In ancient Greek, *techne* means craftsmanship. The term technology is the combination of the words *techne* and *logos/logia*. Technology can therefore be defined as knowledge about the proper and correct application of a theory and principle to create something as a solution or problem (Marthana Yusa, 2016:15). Marthana Yusa continues to explain that the understanding of technology as terminology is also manifested in the form of an idea that can be applied, such as a scientific method and its application. In addition, it is manifested in a system and process. Developments in the understanding of technology are in line with developments in science. Thus, technology is recognized in fields such as superstructure and infrastructure development, architecture, design, assembly, and nanotechnology.

The concept of technology and art is connected to the concept of a creative product. Creative refers to a condition in which a person possesses the power of creativity. A person with a high level of creative power is said to have a high level of creativity. Meanwhile, a creative product usually requires intelligence and imagination. Therefore, the understanding of technology in the context of art can be seen from the presence of creativity. The result of creativity in the form of a creative product or an art product is a high level of innovation. In order to make an innovation, a method known as design is required. Design is a method used in the realization of an innovative artistic practice or technological creation. Through the key of design and innovation, the practice of art and technology is affirmed as a field which produces a product (whether material or ideational).

3. Use of Technology in the Revitalization of Wayang Topeng

Revitalization has been viewed as a concept of artistic development so that the art in question can be regrown by developing aspects that are considered to be vital. Revitalization is an endeavour to make something vital or to revive something that still has a meaningful existence, for which reason its existence needs to be maintained and developed (see Soedarso SP, 2010:2). Dharsono understands revitalization as a concept for developing tradition with a modern touch while referring vitally to tradition (Kartika, 2016: 90).

Dharsono's concept of revitalization indicates that revitalization is carried out by developing form using a touch of a modern concept. A modern concept may be described as the use of a new technique. In the context of performance, the use of a new technique is not limited to the use of technological tools alone but also includes new concepts used in the development or treatment of the performance. Design and innovation in a performance may also be referred to as performing art technology. This corresponds with the idea of Yosi Fajar Kresno Murti in *Mata Jendela* (2016: Vol. XI/4/2016) that a painting, performance, video art, digital display, or setting is a product of art and technology. These forms are the result of innovation and design.

The revitalization of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang has already been carried out in the category of preservation or conservation. In the category of conservation, the revitalization of wayang topeng has produced several new works, including dances that are reconstructions in free form, short dance-dramas without dialogue (dance fragments), and also complete wayang topeng performances that are arranged and packaged with a shorter duration and with

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innovations in various artistic elements such as the design of stage decorations which are simple but display a high aesthetic when combined with the use of stage lighting. The latter form of performance development is discussed in this article, specifically in the context of the presence of a touch of technology in the revitalization of wayang topeng.

The revitalization of wayang topeng has resulted in a new treatment of wayang topeng with the story of *Patah Kuda Narawangsa*. This new performance was held on 15 October 2017 in the village of Jatiduwur in the Kesamben District of the Jombang Regency. On this occasion, Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur was able to visualize a performance presented primarily by school children. This new performance of *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* gained the appreciation of various parties, including the organizer (the East Java Tourism Office), as well as artists and cultural experts, because although it was performed in the village of Jatiduwur, the performance was watched by an audience of people with various connections to the art of wayang topeng.

As mentioned above, this performance was conceived as a performance that was close to its own community. Therefore, it was also prepared as an event to commemorate the Anniversary of Topeng which is celebrated each year by the descendant of the original topeng artist from this village. The series of events leading up and including the performance were: (1) *Khataman* in the home of the topeng owner and 4 nearby prayer houses; (2) Stage preparations; (3) Pilgrimage to the grave of the original topeng artist (Mbah Purwo); (4) Press conference; (5) Performance of Wayang Topeng with the story *Patah Kuda Narawangsa*; and (6) Ritual *mbatek kupaat luar*.

The activity known as *khataman* is held every year by the descendant of the topeng artist (Sumarni) and her family in the Muslim month of Muharram. This year it was held to coincide with the topeng performance. *Khataman* is the rapid recitation of 30 juz from the Qur'an, which in this context must be finished before the midday Zuhr prayer. The activity was held simultaneously in

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several locations, namely in the home of the topeng owner, and in a number of nearby mosques and prayer houses. It was intended as a prayer and a show of reverence or respect for the forefather of the topeng.

After completing the *khataman* ritual, and after the midday Zuhr prayers, there was a pilgrimage to lay flowers on the grave of mbah Purwo. Those taking part in the visit to the grave included the head of the Tri Purwo Budaya Art Studio (Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur), together with family, a number of wayang topeng performers, and the research team. Below is a photograph of the visit to the grave.



Photo 1. Players, studio owner, and research team laying flowers on the grave of Mbah Purwa (Photo: Anik: 2017)

The press conference was intended to provide information, to introduce, and to publicize the upcoming performance of wayang topeng, specifically Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang, to the generally public outside Jatiduwur and outside Jombang. Nowadays the media are the spearhead of publication for anything and anyone. On this occasion, members of the media present included Radar Jombang, Baskara Pers, and Radio Suara Pendidikan Jombang.

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The Klana dance is used as the opening of every performance of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur. It is a symbol of the power of wayang topeng. This dance is mythicized by its owner and by artists of the wayang topeng group for its magical powers and because it portrays the image of the topeng forefather. For this reason, the topeng community believes that the Klana dance must be used to begin every performance of wayang topeng. At the start of the Klana dance, the owner of the mask (Sumarni) fastened the mask and headpiece to the dancer to symbolize giving her blessing to the Klana dancer.



Photo 2. Hj Sumarni fastening the mask on the dancer and giving her blessing, and the performance of the Klana dance to begin the performance of Wayang Topeng with the story *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* (Photo: Setyo, 2017)

The structure of the Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur performance with the story of *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* was as follows: (1) Introduction, (2) Scene 1 (*Jejer Sabrang*), (3) Scene 2 (*Lurugan/budhalan prajurit*), (4) Scene 3 (*Pengembaraan*), (5) Scene 4 (*perang gagal*), (6) Scene 5 (*Goro-goro*), (6) Scene 6 (*jejer Jenggala*).

The touch of technology used in the revitalization of wayang topeng in this performance was through the development of the design of the storyline, arranged as a dance-drama with choreography and dialogue, and supported by an artistic arrangement of a modern performance. The strengthening of the

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choreography was an innovation in the treatment of wayang topeng. The choreographic development was also supported by a performance which made use of height, with the other supporting elements of lighting and an adequate sound system. The development of the artistic staging appeared unique when the artistic layout was applied contextually. The venue of the performance was chosen in a garden area, in which a building was originally to be constructed for use as a wayang topeng studio, but which had never been completed. In the middle of the garden a number of pillars already stand, and this gave the idea for a creative, artistic design. The design compiled by the artistic team in this revitalization program made use of the bamboo in the garden by arranging it into bamboo stakes that were placed at the back of the stage. In front of the pillars was a stage partition made from woven bamboo (*sesekek*). The lights were positioned to the right and left of the stage, on top of the pillars, and a row of decorative lamps was also placed over the stage partition as well as on top of the bamboo at the back of the stage. The background for the stage consisted of bamboo trees and teak trees in the garden which were illuminated with a following spot light. The lighting and stage were designed like a proscenium stage but with a background of bamboo and other dried out plants which were lit up to create a majestic yet natural effect. The unity between the treatment of the dramaturgy and the supporting elements such as lighting and stage layout can be seen in the photo below.

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Photo 3: An illustration of the combined effect of lighting and stage layout in the scene in the kingdom of Jenggala, when Patah Kuda Narawangsa is acting as puppet master in the performance of *Patah Kuda Narawangsa*.
(Photo: Anik: 2017)



Photo 4: The full cast of performers for *Patah Kuda Narawangsa*
(Photo: Anik: 2017)

The elements of movement, topeng, *gending* (music), story (dialogue), and other stage elements were presented in the different scenes of the *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* story. The unity of all these elements gave the performance

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of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur a unique aesthetical value, not only as a folk art but also as a performing art that pays attention to artistic values.

The performance of wayang topeng with the story *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* was watched by members of the public from the village of Jatiduwur and other nearby villages. The performance was promoted through banners that were hung in all places where Jatiduwur borders on other villages, one week before the performance. The performance was also publicized through the media of radio and television. The radio station that broadcast the performance was Radio Suara Pendidikan Jombang, and the television station was JTV.

In addition to the general public, the audience also consisted of art and culture teachers from the Jombang area who belong to the organization MGMP. The organizing committee also sent out special invitations to the Jombang Tourism and Culture Office, the Jombang Education and Culture Office, Jombang Art Council, and heads of all the villages in the Kesamben district.



Photo 5. Invited guests seated to the left of the stage enjoying the performance of Patah Kuda Narawangsa. (Photo: Setyo, 2017)

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The performance of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur with the story of *Patah Kuda Narawangsa* gained wide appreciation from members of the public, as well as from invited guests and stakeholders. One member of the Jombang Art Council stated that the current revitalization efforts for wayang topeng are extremely positive, in particular because of the involvement of school children. The performance brought a breath of fresh air for the life of the traditional art of wayang topeng which at one time had virtually disappeared. He said that the effort to conserve wayang topeng is now reaping success and encouraging the people of Jombang to rise up and take pride in the extraordinary potential of its own folk art (Ghozali, member of Jombang Art Council, interview 15 October 2017).

Similarly, former Head of Culture in Jombang, and current member of Jombang Art Council, Nasrulilahi, said after the performance that Jombang should be proud that the existence of Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur is becoming more prominent. He also added that this village has the potential to be developed as an art village, to include the industrial sector, by reviving the art of mask (topeng) making and collaborating with the forest department to plant trees that can be used as the raw material for making masks. The development of wayang topeng should not be limited to its performance alone but should also include its handicraft (Nasrulilahi, interview 15 October 2017).

The head of Jombang Education and Culture office also expressed his appreciation for the wayang topeng performance, in particular its role in the field of education. The involvement of children as the main performers in the wayang topeng performance will have a positive impact on the life of wayang topeng as well as on the mental education of the children themselves. The storyline and the exploration of the different characters of the figures in the Panji story educate the children directly about noble values, the value of struggle, the value of unity, and so on. Finally, the writer would like to quote

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Arham Rahman (2016: 15), from his article in the journal *Lini Masa*, who said that “Interactivity is the most prominent dimension in the practice of technology-based art. Audience involvement is no longer measured by whether or not a work may be touched but rather it has already become a part of the aesthetic of the work itself.”

4. Conclusion

The life of the traditional arts requires special treatment in connection with revitalization efforts, which should be directed towards the development of the performance itself as well as the development of the performing artists. The smallest touch of technology in the performing arts has the ability to revive the form of the performance to become more attractive for today’s community, which it is hoped will in turn encourage an interest in supporting future performances. On the other hand, the revitalization of performers is urgently needed to support the revival of traditional arts. Children are an effective resource, whose creativity can be developed in the hope that they will subsequently build and strengthen the performing arts of their own communities.

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