Mortar Music Tradition as the Javanese Agrarian Folklore in Magetan, Indonesia

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Abstract: Javanese is familiar with the rich folklore. In Magetan, East Java, Indonesia there is a music tradition that has a form of rhythm pattern from the pounding lesung (a kind of wooden mortar) and pestle. This study focuses on the music phenomena of oral tradition as a way to educate from the elder to younger people. This research uses qualitative interpretative as a method. Qualitative interpretative in this research understand the data from the local terminology and views contextual relationships among the art objects to the culture of society as an organic system. As a result, the mortar music tradition is Javanese agrarian folklore which exists for years. The tradition is contained in the value of fertility, the prominent character of agrarian culture. The society can keep the continuity of life through how they cultivate the land and how they do reproduction from the value of daily life and guides of life.

Keywords: agrarian, folklore, lesung, morta, music

Introduction

Mortar or lesung is one of the agrarian technologies which Magetan people ever had. Mortar is made from wood (in Turi Village, lesung is made from jackfruit wood), with a large size up to two meters for the length and up to a meter for the width. The wood is hollowed. The pestle is also made from wood with the variant diameter and length. Many ethnicities over the archipelago and world have different forms and sizes of mortar and pestle, depending on its function to society. The name adjusts of the local language, such as gejog lesung in Yogyakarta, kothekan lesung in Blora, ale tunjang in Aceh, etc (Suharto, 2014, p. 65). In Africa, there is also a wooden mortar and pestle as traditional rice milling (Carney, 1998, p. 531). The pounding of mortar and pestle even has an image in the United States in 2005, as a logo of Golden Tropics (a food product) which is sold in West African grocery in the U.S (Renne, 2007, pp. 619 & 622). Even, there is an archeological invention of 12,500year-old rock-cut mortars for producing wild barley flour in Natufian sites, South Levant (Eitam et al., 2015, p. 1). This is proof that mortar has a great story in the long history of humankind.

Javanese name this mortar with “lesung” and the pestle named “alu”. Mortar is used to pound rice after harvest, to process paddy grains into the rice. The mortar is pounded only by women, not men. Mortar has functioned not only as an agrarian technology but also as music. Mortar as music is very interested to be discussed. Mortar music is contained by rhythm patterns and songs. The rhythm patterns are constructed by interlocking pound among pestles to mortar which is played by five to six women. Based on data, the society believes that the Goddess Nawang Wulan is a creator of lesung so that the lesung must be played by the woman to honor her. The women who play the mortar music is generally divided into the role. There are gawé omah, titir arang, titir kerep, gedhug, and gembrong.

The rhythms have a unique name, depending on the pattern. Those are Kupu Tarung, Asu Gancet, Dulentheng, Bengah Singo, Bluluk Jeblok, etc. Those repertoires are functioned in rituals, such as thanksgiving ritual for the Goddess of rice, Dewi Sri; as full moon ritual which
is based on the tale of Buta Kala; and are also played at Javanese marriage ritual. Those repertoires are preserved for so long, but now mortar music is almost extinct. It becomes extinct after society uses rice mile for their agriculture. In the past, our planet supported no more than a few million people at a hunting-and-gathering level of existence (Weiss in Relethford, 2003, p. 270). Today the population of the world is more than six billion and continuing to grow. Relethford said that there is no doubt that our ability to learn and develop technology has led to the immense potential for population expansion (Relethford, 2003, p. 270). Mortar has not used today to support the food-producing, whereas the music and the local genius which is produced from the playing mortar should be preserved.

The assumption that mortar as music is Javanese agrarian folklore. Dundes describes that folklore contains two words, “folk” and “lore”(Dananjaja, 1966, pp. 1–2). “Folk” means a group of people who have physical and social identification characteristics so that they can be distinguished from other groups. “Lore” means some culture that is bequeathed by generation to generation orally or through the example which is accompanied by a gesture or mnemonic device. So, folklore is some collective culture which is spread and bequeathed hereditary, among the collective some kinds traditional on the different version, both oral and gesture or mnemonic device (Dananjaja, 1966, p. 2).

Mack (1995, p. 13) said that religious music, children song from the ancestor, entertainment music, dance music, etc, historically are preserved by the process – oral tradition. All of them can be called “folklore”. Mortar music is a product of folklore. In this case, mortar is positioned as a mnemonic device; the repertoire (gendhing) and also the myth as an oral product. The oral tradition is the way of transfer knowledge or education orally. Through mortar music tradition, the knowledge is transferred from the elder to the younger generation.

The assumption is that folklore contains the value of daily life and guide of life for society, such as fertility and cooperation. The value among society ensures a better quality of life. It can be understood by analyses which are explained in this paper.

The research “Mortar Music Tradition as the Javanese Agrarian Folklore in Magetan, Indonesia” should be significant in the study of art and folklore. Daulay said that we recognize the identity of society from knowing and understanding the folklore that they have (Daulay, 2015, p. 141). This research aims to understand the meaning of mortar music and knowing the value of agrarian society life. This research aims to give new knowledge, a new perspective and can be implied to lately context in Indonesia.

Nowadays, industrial culture changes the face of Indonesia, especially Java Island. Some people think that the well being can be gained by the material aspect which can be supplied with good infrastructure and massive development. International Forum for the Advancement of Culture (Jakarta, 10-12 October 2019) – initiated by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, gave some important points on Jakarta Statement. One of them is that well-being and happiness for all is the ultimate goal of development that cannot be merely judged by the amount of material wealth but immaterial factors such as a sense of belonging, pride, mutual trust, and fulfillment. Culture is probably one of the most effective means to bring emotional, intellectual and spiritual satisfaction. This paper indirectly supports the goal.

Method

This research “Mortar Music Tradition as the Javanese Agrarian Folklore in Magetan, Indonesia”, uses qualitative interpretative as a research method. Qualitative is a method with the intensity of quality and values. Interpretative is a method to interpret or elaborate everything
behind the data. The goal of interpretation is to gain the quality of objectivity (Ratna, 2010, p. 467). Generally, this research through the process such as: gathering the data, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman in Ratna, 2010). The analysis is started with understanding the mortar music as folklore. Then continue with understanding the way to transfer knowledge by the oral tradition. Last, the analysis is concluded with finding the value of culture which is transferred orally by the elder generation to the younger generation.

The research is held in Magetan, East Java, Indonesia, specifically in Turi village and also in the “Ledhug (lesung-bedhug) Music Festival” (which annually held in Alun-Alun Magetan). The research runs from 2012 until now. The gaining of data is conducted by observing the festival (days before and after festival), recording, interview, read books, discuss in group, and then interpret the data. The recording is conducted in Turi village in 2015, which records the performance of mortar music in Sunyata’s house, the headman. There were two video results of the recording: the good quality (with video technology support) and the lower quality video (use camera phone). The reason for taking the research place is the society in Turi village still preserves the old repertoires from lesung, which the other village in Magetan not.

The important thing about this research is the interview, which uses the local terms of society. From the interview, this research can gain stories, myths, and society’s point of view. The informant is the big family of Sutadhrana. The key informant is Mbah Mainem (elder), and the other performer such as Saminem, Sutirah, Rukmini, Sainah, (alm.) Supangat, Sarkun, Wardi, Korti, and Kasmiati. The interview is recorded by an audio recorder phone and written on mini notes.

After gaining the interview data, the researcher checks the data whether it is complete. The interview is done more than ones on other days to ensure and confirm the correctness. After the data is complete, the researcher saves the data, maps the data, and writes the data into a paper. The final process is elaborating and interpreting the data to be a paper as needed.

This research is supported by the previous research, “Kajian Metafora Pola Tabuhan Kupu Tarung Studi Kasus di Desa Turi, Magetan, Jawa Timur” (Primamona, 2015). There is some main book which discusses folklore such as Folklor Indonesia (Dananjaja, 1966); Folklord Nusantara - Hakikat, Bentuk, dan Fungsi (Endraswara, 2013); and “About the term of Folklore” – the second chapter of Apresiasi Musik – Musik Populer (Mack, 1995b). There are also previous studies about folklore such as “Nilai-nilai Edukatif dalam Lirik Nyanyian Onang-Onang pada Acara Pernikahan Suku Batak Angkola di Kabupaten Tapanuli Selatan” (Daulay, 2015); “Rekonstruksi Folklor Batak Toba dalam Bentuk Pertunjukan Tortor Sigale-gale” (Sinaga, 2016); etc. In Indonesia, there are not many specifically researches that discuss Indonesian music as folklore.

Results and Discussion

This section will be divided into three: (1) Mortar Music as Folklore; (2) Mortar Music as Media to Transfer Knowledge; and (3) Local Wisdom in Mortar Music.

Mortar Music as Folklore

Dananjaja (1966, pp. 3–4) has determined nine points which are should be considered from the word “folklore”.

- Dissemination and inheritance is done verbally, spread through word of mouth (or with examples that contain gestures, and mnemonic device) from one generation to the next;
Folklore is traditional, which is spread in a relatively fixed form or a standard form, spread for a long time (at least two generations);

Folklore exists in different versions and even variants. This is caused by the way it spreads by word of mouth, through the process of forgetfulness of human beings and the process of interpolation, folklore can easily change. However, the difference only lies in the outside, while the basic form can be maintained;

Folklore is anonymous, the name of the creator is no longer known;

Folklore usually has a formalized or patterned form. Folklore, for example, always uses metaphor phrase like "the fourteen-day moon" to represent a girl's beauty and "like a convoluted snake" to represent the anger of someone, and so on;

Folklore has functions in a shared life in a society. Folklore, for example, has uses as an educational tool, solace, social protest, and hidden desire protest;

Folklore doesn’t make a sense, which has its logic that is incompatible with general logic. This can be applied to oral folklore and mostly oral;

Folklore belongs to the collective of a particular collective. This is certainly caused by the fact that the first creator was no longer recognized so that every society member gathered feel owned;

Folklore is generally sincere and innocent, so it sometimes looks rough, too spontaneous. This can be understood that folklore is a projection of the most honest manifestations of human beings.

Based on those points, mortar music tradition can be concluded as folklore. The mortar music is spread orally not literally among the society. The society mostly works as a farmer with their wide rice field. In general, mortar is the traditional equipment that is made traditionally by hands. In Allakuang village, South Sulawesi, there is a palungeng which is known before the reign of La Makkarakka –the Addatuang (the title of king) Sidenreng I, who rules in century 17 (1634-1671 M) (Zulkfli, 2017, p. 208). Palungeng is the other name of lesung which is made from rocks to process foods (Zulkfli, 2017, p. 202). In Magetan, society uses mortar as agriculture equipment. The paddy pounding is usually done by the women from the earlier morning until the subuh (Muslim time prayer) which is signed by the sound of bedhug and the muadzin (Hanif, 2017, p. 65). The pounding creates music with the rhythm and the interlock. The woman plays the mortar as music consistently.

In the context of music, where there are many rhythm patterns that have their name of repertoire, the pattern is consistently taught. In Turi village, there is the name of gendhing such as Dulenthèng, Kupu Tarung, Grajagan, Kutut Manggung, Slènthak/ Sèmplak Jaran, Ngudang Anak, Blèndrong, Titir Ilang, Bluluk Jeblog, Njojrog, Gambang, Madung, and Wayangan. There are still many gendhing in Turi Village and also the other village in Magetan, such as Bengah Singo which are still unknown. In the other regions, there are many repertoires with the same name as in Magetan but with the different rhythm patterns and techniques of pounding or more complex than that. It shows the versions and variants. The creator of those patterns is unknown. The society said this phrase, “Ket jaman mbiyen yo wis ngono kuwi” or “Saka mbah-mbah mbiyen”, which means that the society doesn’t know who is the creator of the gendhing and they believe that the gendhing has survived from their grannies until today. In Sutadhrana family, the tradition of mortar music has inherited to four generations (Primamona, 2015, p. 4).

As a form of collective music culture, the mortar in Magetan have functions to entertain farmers who are working in the fields, thank giving to Goddes Sri, signifying danger, signaling a celebration (Javanese marriage ritual), performing the rituals of the month of Sura, responding
to the lunar eclipse phenomena and marking a shadow puppet performance. The cultural function is almost the same as the mortar music in other areas. Even in Purvodipuran mortar also used for ritual ronwatan (Wahyudiarto, 2002). In Turi village, the existence of mortar represents the existence and prosperity of a family. Families who have mortars are considered to have rice fields and fields to guarantee adequate food supplies for their members. They work together to keep the food supply. That is social integration. Thus, mortar music has a socio-cultural function in society.

The existence of mortar music tradition which is related to ritual and what they believed is sometimes doesn’t understand by the other society excludes the collective. Ritual in Java is the way of Javanese to honor and thankful for their life, nature, food, house, social life and every phase in human life (for example bear and marriage). It has their logic, or it is called local wisdom. The tradition of mortar music belongs to society. Whoever is the creator of this tradition, society has a necessity to care for and preserve. They believe that this tradition is belonging to their ancestors.

Mortar music tradition is folklore but cannot be called by the term “folk music”. As Mack said that the folk music is the term that a genre of popular music, which can be understood in popular music history especially in America in the 50s and 60s (Mack, 1995b, p. 17). Folk music is more similar to “a brand” which is created by the producer to fulfill a certain need. The traditional aspect (preservation to generations) is nothing, but the social impression is preferred (ex. country music, blues and also folk songs in the context of commercial) (Mack, 1995b, p. 17).

**Picture 1.** Ones of the lesung of Suthadrana family in Turi village. (Photograph by author)

**Picture 2.** This picture was taken during the video recording at the house of Sunyata, the headman of Turi village. (Photograph by author)
Mortar Music as Media to Transfer Knowledge

Mortar music has a function as communication. The sound of pounding is functioned to call people to come to a house. Mortar music is like an announcement to people in any village that the owner of any house has hajatan or celebration. Some informants said that the louder and longer thutukan or pounding mortar is usually more interested people to come. Through playing the mortar, the adult teaches the younger the way of long-distance communication, in a large area without the speaking tube, phone, or another communication device.

Folklore has four functions, namely (1) as a projective system, a means of reflecting the imagination of a collective, (2) as a ratification of social and cultural institutions, (3) as an educational tool (pedagogical device), and (4) as a coercive and supervisory tool so that the norms of society will always be obeyed by their collective members (Bascom in Endraswara, 2013, p. 3).

Endaswara (2013, pp. 4–5) confirms that folklore can be used as an educational tool, formal, non-formal and informal education. Therefore, mortar music is a media of education in the context of society and culture.

Mortar music is a media to transfer knowledge. The knowledge transferred is the value of local wisdom that relates to the belief and norm of cultural habit. The value is contained in gendhing and cultural habit in playing or pounding the mortar. The value of togetherness is built when the society gathered with the community. The harvest ritual, thanksgiving rituals, and other Javanese rituals allow for the transfer of values.

There is a transmitting process between the people when they met, eat, shared stories, chewing whiting, smoked and even when the sacred ritual. The adult gives an example of doing something in the togetherness, such as harvest, pound, make food, serves the food, etc. The adult then let the younger people to do the same, and the adult supervises them. The elder has the strategic to transmit wisdom. The younger beautify the rules. It is different among the woman and the man’s habit. The girls automatically learn how they have to do with their mother or other women. In Africa, there is a ritual process of the Opha. It is a rite of passage for young girls entering into adulthood in the Urhobo society (Agberia, 2006, p. 249). This is a transition from the age of childhood to a new and mature age group with social responsibilities that are attached to adulthood. This ritual ceremony is often the rigorous exercise of emete-yanvwo (clitoridectomy) (Agberia, 2006, p. 250). Besides, the responsibility transfer process in Turi Village is seemed to be natural in society’s consciousness.

Picture 3. Children are watching the performance. (Photograph by author)

The process of regeneration also let the younger people know their position in a family group or a larger community. All of the lesung or mortar players have kinship or family relationships. For example in a mortar music group in Turi village, which is known as Sutadhrana family, has
a relationship in blood. They are also families because of marriage. The players of mortar music know each other. The players know who the leader is in the group. They know what should to learn and what should to do with the mortar. In another village in Magetan also has the same case. The members in a mortar music group usually have the same ancestor in the same village. All in all, the mortar music is folklore that can be a strategic position as education in the context of Javanese culture.

**Local Wisdom in Mortar Music**

Based on the previous research “Kajian Metafora Pola Tabuhan Kupu Tarung Studi Kasus di Desa Turi, Magetan, Jawa Timur”, *gendhing* “Kupu Tarung” – a repertoire of mortar music in Turi village, it was found that the *gendhing* contained the value of fertility. Kupu Tarung can be translated into a mating butterfly. It is a metaphor from the sexual intercourse of human. The value of fertility is actualized into the sound of pounding pestle to pestle, two pestles of “*gawé omah*”. The “knock” of its point of pestles is the representation of mating the genital of the female and male. The mating is also visualized to the cross of the pestle. From this *gendhing* is also known about the concept of taboo in Javanese culture. Taboos can be defined as unwritten rules or prohibitions that regulate human behavior (Saj in Riley, 2010, p. 238). The elder said that Javanese prefer to talk about marriage than dating. Like a butterfly, which has couples in the breeding season, human nature does.

Other *gendhing* or repertoires of *lesung* have a similarity of their names. The repertoires such as *Kupu Tarung*, *Kutut Manggung*, *Slènthak/ Sémplak Jaran*, *Bluluk Jeblog*, dan *Bengah Singo* are adopted from the animal behavior. Based on the interview with the *dalang* (Javanese shadow puppeteer), *Bengah Singo*, the *gendhing* which he ever met, has the value of fertility. The phrase *Bengah Singo* can be translated to be the lusty lion. It means that the *gendhing* metaphorically represents the cycle of interest to the opposite sex. The other *gendhing* which exist are *Dulènthèng*, *Grajagan*, *Blèndhong*, *Titir Ilang*, *Ngudang Anak*, *Njojrog*, *Gambang*, *Madung*, and *Wayangan*. *Dulènthèng* is usually used to open the performance of mortar music. It is onomatopoeic of its sound. *Wayangan* has a similar case, which is usually played during the opening of a shadows puppet show. *Njojrog*, *Ngudang Anak* and *Titir ilang* are named based on their specific rhythm pattern. *Gendhing Ngudang Anak* has a typical technique of *gawé omah* pestle. The *gawé omah* pestle is pounded to the buffer wood or rock outside the *lesung*. In my opinion, it represents how the parent dandles the children or how the mother lulls her baby by patting her baby’s bottom. As same as its name, “*ngudang anak*” means danding. There are still many *gendhing* that have very unique names that contain stories. However, those patterns and values are bequeathed to the next generation.

In the mortar music tradition in Turi village, the women who play the music have each name. They are *gawé omah*, *titir arang*, *titir kerep*, *gedhug*, and *gembrong*. Each role has its respective duties. *Gawé omah* opens or starts the *gendhing* and becomes a code for the *gendhing* from the beginning to ending. The *titir arang* works just like the drum in the *gamelan ageng*, giving consistent beats from beginning to end. The pestle with this role is played by vibrating into the body of the mortar that causes the sound ‘*ter*’. ‘*Arang*’ means rarely from the word “*jarang*” in Bahasa Indonesia. The function of the *titir kerep* is the same as the *titir arang*, but it has a double stroke, often than *titir arang*. It produces ‘*tek*’ sound. *Gedhug* has a function like a *kendhang*, namely as a rhythm keeper, accommodating fast or slow rhythms and filling melodies in the form of different timbre. Meanwhile, *gembrong* in the mortar game has functions like *kempul* and *gong* in *gamelan ageng*. The pestle used has different lengths and
diameters based on function in their role. In Yogyakarta, the pestles have their name and function such as dundung, gawé, arang, kerep, and amblung (Peters & ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2003). Their function is similar to the mortar music in Turi village, but the difference is their position in mortar. In other regions do the same. In Turi village, there is a concept about “lontas” from the word “untas” from the Javanese language which means loud and clear. It is an aesthetical concept from the lesung player which is understood only in their community.

**Picture 4.** The illustration picture to describe the role of the pestle. (Photograph by author)

**Picture 5.** The pestle or alu. (Photograph by author)

In Turi village and almost the Javanese in Magetan believe in Dewi Sri, the Goddess of Rice. The legend of Dewi Sri has many versions. She is a good girl who becomes a goddess after she died. In short, many Magetan people cult Dewi Sri who makes the grains and keep the fertility and the success of their abundance of agriculture product. As an example the society in Simbatan village, where there is a site named ‘Petirtaan Dewi Sri’. Simbatan people worship the Goddess Sri in every month Sura (Javanese calendar) by ‘bersih desa’ ritual. Then in Sadon temple, near the location of the research, the caretaker of the temple said that every Sura, many people come to give sesajen (special food) on the temple. There is also a “lumpang” statue - mortar with the more little form statue. They believe the Goddess Sri makes the grains and she is also the grain itself. It is an anthropomorphic concept of God—an entity possessing beliefs, desires, and emotions that behaves like human beings (Morewedge & Clear, 2008, p. 183).
Furthermore, many consider their relationships with supernatural agents such as God to be subject to the same norms of reciprocal altruism as their social relationships with other human beings (Bering, Johnson & Krüger in Morewedge & Clear, 2008, p. 183). So, they respect the Goddess of rice as they respect human through the many ways that they believe.

![Picture 6. Sadon or Reog Temple in Panekan, Magetan. (Photograph by author)](image)

While there are also the myths of Dewi Nawang Wulan—who make the lesung. Dewi Nawang Wulan is a goddess from the seventh goddess who comes to the earth to swim in a river. In short, she falls in love with Jaka Tarub, the man who hides her shawl so that she cannot go back to the kahyangan (heaven). As a goddess, she can make the rice to be abundance with magic, but someday her magic power is gone. When her magic power is gone, she made the lesung, to process the grain into the rice. She also cooks the rice, until she suddenly finds her shawl then she comes back to the kahyangan.

From the two stories above, it can be seen that women occupy the main story. The interpretation, the women are constructed by culture to take a part in social and cultural life.

In agrarian communities, there is a certain unwritten rule concerning the division of labor between men and women during the work in the rice fields. The men prepare the land for planting. Planting of seeding, weeding and driving birds away are the tasks of women. At the planting season, men arrange the irrigation to see that their rice fields are always flooded with water. At harvest time the women take a major part in the process of turning grain into the rice. So, lesung players are women (Peters & ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2003).

The stories have a value to be the guide of life which represents the cultural background around the mortar music tradition. In another region such as Sunda, West Java, there are also the Sundanese well-established performing arts specific to the area, as well as a specific set of gender-based conventions in organizing their living arrangements (Williams, 1998, p. 74).

The next myth is about “Buta Kala mangan candra”. It means the giant who is named Buta Kala eats the full moon. It happens during the lunar eclipse. Based on the interview, there are many people in Magetan believe that natural phenomena are a mystical moment. They hurry to take the lesung to be pounded as loud as possible, to call the other to do the same. They pound it as long, as loud as possible to banish the giant eating the moon. The eaten moon will cause the dark of night and they believe that the dark is not good for life. The villager who is sleeping or doing something at the moment, go outside of their houses. They gather in a circle, sing, and enjoy the mortar music while seeing the lunar eclipse phenomenon. However, mortar music tradition teaches the complexity of living in a society, which almost works as a farmer, how to respect the process of life and how they should be in a society.
Conclusion

First, the mortar music tradition is Javanese agrarian folklore which is qualified for the aspects of folklore. The dissemination and inheritance are done verbally, spread through word of mouth (or with examples that contain gestures, and mnemonic device) from one generation to the next. Mortar music is traditional, which is spread in a relatively fixed form or in a standard form, spread for a long time. Mortar music exists in different versions and even variants in Indonesia. Mortar music is anonymous and it usually has a formalized or patterned form. Mortar music has functions in a shared life in a society. Mortar music has its own logic that is incompatible with general logic. Mortar music belongs to the collective of a particular collective. Mortar music is generally sincere and innocent.

Second, mortar music can be functioned as a traditional media of communication. Mortar music is a media to transfer knowledge. The knowledge transfer process seemed to be natural in society’s consciousness.

Third, the mortar music is contained in the value of fertility, the prominent character of agrarian culture. The society can keep the continuity of life through how they cultivate the land, how they live socially and culturally, how they do reproduction from the value of daily life and guides of life which are contained in mortar music tradition in Magetan, East Java, Indonesia.

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Turi, Magetan, Jawa Timur.


