

Wayang Beber in the Postmodern Era

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ABSTRACT

The development in the postmodern era can revitalize the existence of *Wayang Beber* (a Javanese puppet). This paper was written with qualitative approach and a case study design. Data collection technique was done through literature studies, documentation, and interviews. The data analysis technique was interactive data cycle. The findings reveal that *Wayang Beber* revolutionized the functions, themes, visual forms, production techniques, and the overall show to be more attractive in the postmodern era. The revolutionary changes in the *Wayang Beber* show aim to make it more approachable to the general public. Ultimately, the puppet show's existence has been reborn into a more attractive form.

Keywords— *Aesthetics, Wayang Beber, Postmodern*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wayang Beber is the oldest Javanese puppet and one of the Indonesian cultural artifacts. UNESCO designated *Wayang Beber* as the Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on November 7, 2003. The puppet comes from Java and it is the two-dimensional form (*diwmatra*) of the three-dimensional statue (*trimatra*) [1]. The term *Wayang Beber* originates from a word in Javanese language *ambèbèr* that means opening by stretching [2]. *Wayang Beber* is also known as a picture with a storyline and is performed with musical instruments and Javanese *suluk* or poetry [3].

The transformation of *Wayang Beber's* visual form is the result of the acculturation influenced by the symbols of Hinduism-Buddhism [1]. *Wayang Beber* first emerged in the 10th century during the Mamenang Kingdom, led by Raja Jayabaya. Previously, *Wayang Beber* was drawn on palm leaves in a black and white tone [4]. At that time, *Wayang Beber* was only known locally. Stories depicted in *Wayang Beber* shows mostly revolve around Panji Asmorobangun's stories.

People began to take notice of the existence and development of *wayang Beber* in the 12th century. In that century, people began to recognize *Wayang Beber* and frequently talked about it [4]. *Wayang Beber* was introduced by Prabu Suryawasisa of the Jenggala Kingdom. *Wayang Beber* rose in popularity during the kingdom of Mataram in 1283 AD, led by King Jaka Sesuruh. The existence of *Wayang Beber* was known because of *Suryasengkala* (Year of Creation), which reads *Gunaning Pujangga Sembahing Dewa* meaning that *Wayang Beber* was created in the year 1283 (1361 AD) [5].

Over time, the popularity of *Wayang Beber* began to wane. It enjoys its popularity until the 18th century. *Wayang Beber's* popularity began to recede due to the Islamic

kingdom policies that did not allow the puppet to be performed because *Wayang Beber* performances were full of spells and offerings as well as pictures resembling living creatures. The decline in popularity was also caused by the continuous tragedy of chaos, poverty, and civil war [4]. According to Cohen in his research, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the 'death' of *Wayang Beber*. Newer generations had no knowledge of *Wayang Beber* anymore [6].

The world keeps changing, and the human civilization enters the postmodern era. Postmodernism influences have also occurred in Indonesia, especially in the arts and culture. Postmodernism in Indonesia had encouraged the revival of *Wayang Beber*. At the end of the 20th century, *Wayang Beber* started to reappeared in society. Pretković and Tea Škrinjarić in their research stated that *Wayang Beber* was revived under the New Order Indonesia in 1966-1998 [7]. *Wayang Beber* was part of the conservatory arts curriculum in Central Java in the 1980s.

Postmodernism has influenced the revival and revitalization of *Wayang Beber*. The new *Wayang Beber* changes in terms of its function, theme, visual form, the production technique, and its performance. The visual form transformation of *Wayang Beber* aims to make it more approachable to the general public.

The function of the new *Wayang Beber* has shifted from a ritual medium to the entertainment one. The story performed in *Wayang Beber* performances varies, including the everyday life theme. The stage arrangement has also become more sophisticated in terms of the lighting, the music accompaniment that includes modern music, and female puppeteer.

This paper focuses on the changes in *Wayang Beber* after its revitalization and the influences of Postmodernism in Indonesia. Therefore, this paper aims to provide insights into

Wayang Beber for those interested in this area and to

2. METHOD

This is qualitative research with the case study design. The case study design was used to correlate the findings in the observation process by the author with the findings of other studies. The results are then correlated with the documents obtained. The data were collected by means of literature study, documentation, and interviews. The literature used in this books were books and journals related to the study of *Wayang Beber* in the postmodern era. The documentation was obtained from manuscript sources related to *Wayang Beber*.

Several interviews were conducted with several informants such as Wisto Utomo (the caregiver of *Wayang Beber* in Wonosari), Noni (a female puppeteer), Ki Slamet Haryadi (a puppeteer in Wonosari), and Indra Suroinggeno (the founder of *Wayang Beber* Museum and studio). The data were then analyzed using the interactive cycles. The data analysis process consisted of data collection, data presentation, data reduction, and conclusion drawing [8]. The observation and assessment processes were carried out in Yogyakarta and Central Java regions. The objects of the study was the development of *Wayang Beber* from its early stage to the postmodern era.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1. History of Wayang Beber Development

The development of *Wayang Beber* began during the Islamic Sultanate of Demak in the year 1475-1554. During this period, *Wayang Beber* visual form began to evolve in terms of its figures and performances. The changes were influenced by the Islamic symbols and the Islamic concept that prohibits any paintings resembling human figures as well as the aniconism concept. The human figure paintings in *Wayang Beber* were transformed by Sunan Kalijaga. Sunan Kalijaga used *Wayang Beber* as media to spread Islam in Java [5]. During this time, the puppet show began to use musical accompaniment. The musical accompaniment were *rebab*, *kendhang*, *kethuk*, *kempul*, *kenong*, and *gong suwukan* [7].

Over time, postmodernism has influenced the life patterns of people in Indonesia. It is inevitable that modernism changes life patterns. Therefore, *Wayang Beber* is required to undergo a transformation in order to be well accepted by the postmodern community. Modernism in society is characterized by rationalism, materialism, and capitalism. These three elements are supported by the development of science and technology [9].

Based on the literature review and research by the author, it was found that the transformation of *Wayang Beber* in the postmodern era covers 4 fields. The 4 fields are of the function, the theme, the visual form, the production technique, and the

maintain *Wayang Beber's* existence through literature performance. A more detailed discussion of these changes are as follows:

3.2. Development of Wayang Beber's Function

The postmodern era saw the development of *Wayang Beber* function. Its function is more flexible and not fixated on specific rules. In the Sastrimirudo manuscript, *Wayang Beber* was used in Ruwatan (a ceremony to cast out evil spirits) in the 17th century during the kingdom of Mataram [7]. According to Wisto Utomo and Ki Slamet Haryadi (April 2019), in the past, the puppets were used not only for performances but also used for blessings. The blessings could be in the form of great fortunes, career promotion, and recovery from illness. The classic *Wayang Beber* was considered as a sacred heirloom. At the end of 2008, this belief was neglected because it is regarded as a sin.

As knowledge rapidly develops, the traditional view is then discarded. The old function of *Wayang Beber* as ritual media has shifted to entertainment media. The shift in its function is the community's attempt to revitalize *Wayang Beber*. The *Wayang Beber* in the postmodern era prioritizes the beauty of its visual form. This shift occurs in Pacitan, where the community has shifted *Wayang Beber* as a form of ritual to an aesthetic performance.

3.3. Development of Wayang Beber's theme

The classic *Wayang Beber* mostly talked about the love story between Raden Panji Asmorobangun and Dewi Sekartaji. The story is depicted in every classic *Wayang Beber* show with various *gagrak* or styles. According to Ki Slamet Haryadi (interviewed on 13 April 2019), the classic *Wayang Beber* show is preserved only in East Java, which presents the story of Panji Kembang Kuning and in Wonosari-Yogyakarta about Remen Mangunjoyo. The tale of Panji is a legend originating from East Java [9]. In the past, *Wayang Beber* only shows the rendition of Panji's love story. However, the story in the postmodern *Wayang Beber* is more compelling. The emergence of new stories in *Wayang Beber* began in 2004 [11]. The story development of *Wayang Beber* occurred in Wonosari and Pacitan. The development was introduced by Dani Iswardana, a puppeteer from Surakarta, Central Java. He created the city version of *Wayang Beber* stories. The postmodernism influenced the story themes of *Wayang Beber* which make the show more compelling and sophisticated. Jakarta also witnessed the development of *Wayang Beber* with contemporary stories. The show is called *Wayang Beber Metropolitan*. The story transformation aims to introduce the Indonesian traditional arts to the younger generation. The stories are wrapped in interesting plots to compel the younger generation.

3.4. Development of the Visual Form of *Wayang Beber*

Prior to the postmodern era, *Wayang Beber* had undergone several changes in its visual form. The changes in visual form can be seen from the painting style of human figures, animals, nature, and other ornaments. *Wayang Beber* was first created by drawing on the incised palm leaves dyed black using charcoal. Therefore, *Wayang Beber* painting used to be in black and white. Innovation in the production process occurred during the Kingdom of Jenggala. Papers made of bark were used as *Wayang Beber* media. The paper was called *daluwang*. It was also in this period that the paintings of *Wayang Beber* used colors (white, black, yellow, blue, and red) from natural dyes.

After Islam came to Indonesia, during the Kingdom of Demak, the visual form of *Wayang Beber* transformed. The transformation occurred in the painting style of the human figure. The *Wayang Beber* was then re-innovated by Sunan Kalijaga. Sunan Kalijaga transformed the realistic human paintings in *Wayang Beber* into a more decorative form. Therefore, the pictures did not resemble the realistic form of the living creatures, and it did not oppose the concept of Islamic teachings at that time. In terms of the color, Sunan Kalijaga used the same color composition as before.

When the postmodernism reached Indonesia in the 20th century, *Wayang Beber* underwent a transformation in terms of its visual form. *Wayang Beber* experienced near extinction in the 18th century until the 19th century because kraton (palaces occupied by the Javanese royals) banned *Wayang Beber* to enter the palace. *Wayang Beber* was revived later on. The transformation of *Wayang Beber's* visual form can be seen in the way the characters in the story and the ornaments are painted in each scene. In the postmodern era, each scene is depicted freely. Sometimes, the figures in *Wayang Beber* are even painted in a cartoon-like style. Nowadays, the visual form of *Wayang Beber* could be found in *Wayang Beber Kota* (Urban *Wayang Beber*) and *Wayang Beber Metropolitan* (Metropolitan *Wayang Beber*). The puppets in both *Wayang Beber Kota* and *Wayang Beber Metropolitan* are painted in a contemporary style and in bright colors.

3.5. *Wayang Beber* Manufacturing Technique

When *Wayang Beber* was first created, the technique used was the *Mentoreh* technique or scraping the palm leaves. *Mentoreh* is a scraping technique using a knife with a sharp tip. Ancient palm leaves are used as raw materials because they grow in many parts of Indonesia, especially in Java. In the 14th century, *Wayang Beber* was made using painting technique. The painting technique used *sungging* coloring and color gradations. The coloring technique is very complicated because it must be precise [9]. Color is made from natural materials, for at that time, there were no synthetic dyes. Wisto Utomo, the owner of *Wayang Beber* Wonosari, said that the painting was made with the following materials:

- White from the animal's bones that are burned and then finely ground.
- Black from finely ground oyan.
- Red from the lipstick.
- Yellow from a finely ground atal stones
- Blue from the water essence of crushed indigo-colored leaves
- Daluang paper made from thinned Daluang bark dried in the sun

Using natural materials and media in making the classic *Wayang Beber* is remarkably unique. In the postmodern era, these materials are still used, but the craft techniques are different. Hermin Istiaringsih or known as Mbah Ning is a renowned *Wayang Beber* painter from Solo and he uses this unique technique by producing natural dyes. Mbah Ning developed other coloring materials, such as yellow from turmeric, blue from indigo leaves, and red from the sappan wood.

The technique for producing colors is also developed by Indra Suroinggeno, a student from Mbah Ning. Indra combines natural dyes with synthetic dyes. The goal is to get the best color quality that lasts longer. According to Indra, the white artificial color is added to the mixture. The color can be mixed with natural dyes' pigment. The white synthetic color serves as the glue while the natural dye' pigment provides colors as well as giving a distinctive aroma. Gradation technique is also used.

Technology and digitalization develops rapidly. *Wayang Beber* could be designed by using an application such as CorelDraw, Adobe Illustrator and so forth. The printing technique is used to finish all the process. The printed *Wayang Beber* can be used as wall decorations. The *Wayang Beber* in the postmodern era can be made into digital animation created with Adobe Flash, Unity, and other applications. The digital animation of *Wayang Beber* has been posted on social media, especially on YouTube. This advancement in producing *Wayang Beber* further enhances its visual form. Postmodernism encourages people to express themselves better when creating *Wayang Beber*.

3.6. Development of *Wayang Beber* Performances

The first *Wayang Beber* was performed during the period of Memanang Kingdom. The show only displayed puppets made from palm leaves with a narration. During its early development, *Wayang Beber* performances were not accompanied by any musical instruments. However, a development was made during the Kingdom of Jenggala: *Wayang Beber* performances were accompanied by *sulukan* or Javanese poetry. Poetry made the shows even more sophisticated.

Wayang Beber performances started to use musical instruments during the Demak Kingdom. The man behind this innovation was Sunan Kalijaga. The musical instruments used at that time was minimal, ranging from rebab, kendhang, knock, kempul, kenong, to gong suwukan

[4]. Those *gamelan* instruments are much more complicated to accompany the narration of *Wayang Beber*, reflecting high social classes and refined culture [12]. The musical accompaniment makes the performances more sophisticated, and *Wayang Beber's* popularity soared.

The postmodern era also saw the development of *Wayang Beber* in terms of the show components. The development occurred in the songs, stage design, and puppeteers. The modern music and songs were also used in the show. The combination of *gamelan* and modern musical instruments make the show more compelling. The musicians have the freedom to arrange musical accompaniment for the show without any restriction. The songs accompanied *Wayang Beber* range from *langgam* (Javanese style songs), pop songs, jazz songs, to madle songs.

The stage setting for the postmodern *Wayang Beber* show has a more diverse composition. The stage lighting uses both the halogen lamps and *parled* lamps. *Parled* lamps bring more artistic values to *Wayang Beber* performances. Meanwhile, the offerings at the stage are not intended for ritual purposes, but they are parts of stage decorations. This is the stage setting of *Wayang Beber Metropolitan* in Jakarta.

The puppeteers of *Wayang Beber* used to be of male gender only. This was partly due to the Javanese conventional belief that it was a taboo for a woman to be a puppeteer. There was even a myth telling people that were there a female puppeteer; disasters would follow herself or her parents. However, this belief has gradually waned over time. Nowadays, a woman can be a puppeteer. Wonosari, a region in Yogyakarta, has witnessed the rise of the first female puppeteer, Noni. She is the daughter of Wisto Utomo, and she performed *Wayang Beber* with the rendition of Remen Mangunjoyo's story. Although in her early career there was a conflicting public opinion regarding her profession, nowadays, Noni is well received and has performed in various regions.

3.7. The Existence of Wayang Beber in the Postmodern Era

Postmodernism reached Indonesia during the New Order regime. It had permeated in Indonesian communities and influenced their life patterns. Postmodernism is recognized as beneficial to revitalize *Wayang Beber*. The changes evoked by postmodernism are *Wayang Beber's* function, stories, visual form, production technique, and performances. These changes make *Wayang Beber* more suitable for any event. The changes in the story make *Wayang Beber* more relatable to audiences' everyday lives. The visual form is much more sophisticated. This is in line with the development of production technique, which allows artists to express their creativity in making *Wayang Beber* freely. The performances have developed as well, and it becomes more compelling because many arrangements are well prepared during the show. Nowadays, *Wayang Beber's* visual form is much attractive as it takes the contemporary style. Changes in form and packaging allow people to express their opinions freely.

Because of its modern looks, the postmodern *Wayang Beber* is suitable for various events and purposes, one of which is it can serve as learning media. *Wayang Beber* has substantial meaning and philosophy as well as refined visual forms and performances. The transformation of *Wayang Beber* could revitalize the traditional arts that lost its popularity

The innovation made by *Wayang Beber* artists aimed to make the millennial generation love the traditional arts. The current visual form of *Wayang Beber* is beautiful and compelling. The popularity of *Wayang Beber* among the public has been steadily increasing. This is shown by *Wayang Beber* performances at various celebrations. In the postmodern era, several cultures and arts teachers have used *Wayang Beber* as learning media. Introducing *Wayang Beber* to millennial students is very important to maintain their existence. Students can learn many things from *Wayang Beber*. The teachers' roles are significant in introducing *Wayang Beber* as learning media or subject matter in schools.

Wayang beber is now in animated video format and they have been published on social media accounts. The development of digital technology makes it easy to introduce *Wayang Beber* to the public. YouTube is social media with a lot of content related to *Wayang Beber*. Materials pertaining to *Wayang Beber* on social media has been spread across communities. Digital technology available in the postmodern era helps a lot in preserving *Wayang Beber*.

In this postmodern era, *Wayang Beber* conservationist communities have emerged. These communities continue to make innovations preserve the existence of these traditional arts. In Bantul - Yogyakarta, there is a *Wayang Beber* museum called Sekartaji, which was founded by Indra Suroinggeno. The museum features several classic *Wayang Beber*, Mbah Ning style of painting, and the postmodern style. The museum is educational tourism for the surrounding community interested in *Wayang Beber*. In the museum, there is also an educational studio to learn how to paint *Wayang Beber* and to perform it. The studio was named Bhuana Alit. The studio is also suitable for young children to learn about *Wayang Beber*.

Sanggar Bhuana Alit encourages children to freely express their creativity and paint *Wayang Beber* based on their concept. As a result, the children appreciate *Wayang Beber* more. They enjoy Indra Suroinggeno's classes about *Wayang Beber*. *Wayang Beber* community has also performed in Malioboro - Yogyakarta at the Car Free Day event every the third Tuesday of every month (wage, a Javanese calendar system). The young people at that event much appreciate *Wayang Beber* performances.

Preservation efforts are significant for the survival of this traditional art. Innovative visual forms of *Wayang Beber* are urgently needed in this postmodern era. More full public appreciation for the traditional arts is significant in the preservation effort. Understanding in postmodern *Wayang Beber* could help preserve it.

4. CONCLUSION

Wayang Beber is an Indonesian traditional art that existed since the 10th century during the kingdom of Memanang. *Wayang Beber* continues to grow over time. Changes in its visual form mark the development of *Wayang Beber* in the postmodern era. The function of *Wayang Beber* has shifted from ritual media to entertainment and educational media. The visual form of *Wayang Beber* has also changed from realistic style to decorative one, and the painting style of the postmodern *Wayang Beber* is more attractive. The production technique has also transformed. In the past, *Wayang Beber* was made from natural materials, and nowadays, it is made by using digital media. In terms of stage performances, *Wayang Beber* used to be performed alone without any musical instruments. In the postmodern era, it could be accompanied by modern music and be performed by female puppeteers.

The postmodern *Wayang Beber* is packaged in a more attractive style. The postmodern society, especially the millennial generation, welcomes and appreciates the visual transformation of *Wayang Beber*. *Wayang Beber* show is not intended for specific purposes only. It could be performed on various occasions depending on time and place. This flexibility makes *Wayang Beber* popular. The development of digital technology facilitates education about *Wayang Beber*. The museums, studios, and *Wayang Beber* communities help preserving this traditional art. Postmodernism makes *Wayang Beber* more respected and able to survive in the globalization era.

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