



About the Spiritual Element in *Lengger Banyumas*

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Submitted: June 19, 2024. Revised: September 12, 2024. Accepted: November 16, 2024

Abstract

This research aims to trace the relevancy of the spiritual element in the rural dance art form *lengger Banyumas*. The art originated in Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia, as a dance in agricultural ceremonies to worship the Goddess of Fertility, Dewi Sri, but it developed and assimilated new functions, such as entertainment, in terms of performance. Despite that, the spiritual connection of the dance with the Divine remained, and it can be seen in the relationship between the dancer, God, and nature which remained unchanged over time. This is shown through a thick description of the process of becoming a *lengger* dancer, the existence of holy places, as well as the use of offerings in *lengger* performances. The research method of this study is a critical historical, based on one and half years of research in Banyumas. The techniques used are participant observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, as well as visual data (photos and videos). In terms of interviews, the research involved about 13 informants, all of which related to *lengger* in some way. Results show that spirituality is still very much relevant in the world of *lengger* and is an inseparable part of the performance and the life of dancers despite being subject to changes. The presence of the spiritual element in *lengger* nowadays speaks about how important the connection between the Divine is in Java, Indonesia.

Keywords: *lengger*; dance; spirituality; Banyumas

How to Cite: Bugov, D. T. (2024). About the Spiritual Element in *Lengger Banyumas*. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, 24(2), 444-457

INTRODUCTION

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga speaks about the *homo ludens* or the importance of the *play* element in culture and society. He finds the element of *play* in almost every aspect of human life, such as nature, language, law, and war, as well as arts, including dance and performing arts. He further argues that the *play* element is involved with categories such as rituality, mythology, tradition, the lived experience, and the aesthetic (Huizinga, 2016).

Dance is a minimalised variant of the play because it happens at a special

time and place. Dance exists in the liminal space where every-day rules and identities do not apply and people are free to experience (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010) through embodiment practices which reveal new approaches to the human experience (Hughes-Freeland, 2010). Dance is a safe space where the lived experience gets a new meaning (Wulff, 2018). In addition, it is an inherent element of socialisation (Kaeppeler, 1978) and a way to analyse social circles and trends (Lange, 1982). Evans-Pritchard (1928) offers one of the first discussions on dance and its significance for society by stressing its functions (religious

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and psychological) and social value, while Mead (2001), another pioneer, focuses on the dance's ability to building character. Lastly, Grau (1993) suggests that through dance, one can understand society by underlying the change that has happened within the dance system.

These findings also apply to the Javanese dance canon. Geertz (1976) writes that the whole identity of the Javanese people is revealed in the Javanese dance ethos, which has its own philosophy encoded in the principles of *olah rasa*. *Olah rasa* is the connecting link between the Javanese arts in general, mysticism and etiquette. By mastering *olah rasa* one can make a difference between *lahir* (outer reality) and *batin* (inner reality) and encourage the lived experience (Sugiarto & Suparno, 2024: p. 2). This principle is also at the very bottom of every dance tradition across Java, with its local interpretations and understandings.

Rituality, spirituality, religiousness, and the lived experience are all inseparable parts of the existence of traditional popular dances in Java, Indonesia (Foley, 2015). One of these dances is *lengger Banyumas*, whose connection to those elements has been studied a lot recently. In general, researchers pay attention to the art's connection with the Divine (Suraji, 2018; Susana et al., 2018), the presence of a spirit called *indhang* and its relation to the dancer (Fukuoka, 2014; Iman Hartanto, 2016; Marsiana & Arsih, 2018), and Islam and *lengger* (Noviansah et al., 2023), as well as gender understandings of the art (Raharjo et al., 2022).

The novelty of this research lies in fact that it provides a complete ethnographic account of the current situation of the spiritual element in *lengger*. It also analyses its development (change over time) and relevance in terms of dancers and performance, who are also part of the bigger Indonesian culture. Polhemus (1993) reveals that culture and dance walk hand in hand and the study of dance is valuable for identifying the changes of society.

The study is comprised of three parts – introduction, discussion and conclusion.

The author acquaints the audience with the basics of *lengger* in the introduction. In the discussion he focuses on the spiritual element of *lengger* and its current existence concerning *lengger*. The conclusion summarises all the above.

METHOD

This research follows a qualitative approach with its primary objective being the spiritual aspect of *lengger* and its development, looked through the lenses of historical and descriptive perspectives.

In order to achieve that, the author has conducted a year and half fieldwork research (from October 2022 to April 2024) in Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. The author has travelled in Greater Banyumas (which comprises the majority of districts in the province) to capture moments, performances, activities pertaining to the spiritual and speak with local actors and communities to establish one wholesome picture of *lengger's* connection to the spiritual. In the hope of offering a fuller account of the topic, data was collected using participant observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and visual data to support or enrich the verbal data.

Through participant observation, the author was able to engage daily with the people (dancers, actors, and people involved with *lengger*) to inquire more about *lengger's* relation with spirituality. Getting acquainted with the actors was not an easy task and took some time. Patience was the key to fully delving into the spiritual aspect and making conclusions based on people's thoughts, observations, and experiences. After earning the informants' trust and contributing to the community, the author was free to ask questions about *lengger*. That is the reason why in-depth and semi-structured interviews were initiated after roughly 8 months of fieldwork. Needless to say, the flow of accessing information after obtaining trust and building friendships was way easier, and the essence of the data was more vibrant and complete. Additionally, the author visited

places pertaining to the spirituality of *lengger* and completed some of the rituals to further immerse himself with the studied object.

Continuing with in-depth and semi-structured interviews, the author was able to listen and account on important moments of *lengger's* characteristics, including spirituality. Interviews were held throughout the research in different and unpredictable conditions, such as during trips, performances, or over a cup of coffee. A script of questions was applied to some of the informants for the sake of consistency. Each and every informant was interviewed separately to maximise the diversity of data. Voice recording and video recording by phone were the instruments used to collect the data. All participants were purposely selected, meaning that they know of the *lengger* culture and can contribute to this research. Informants include: Adminah (59) from Nusawunggu; Rianto (41) from Kalibagor; Rini (54) from Banyumas; Bagoes (37) from Sumbang; Supartiningsih (41) from Sumpiuh; Narsih (50s) from Patikraja, Piko (22) from Banyumas; Karamiharjo (58) from Kemangkong, Rudi (52) from Tambak, Sukarmi (57) from Purbalingga; Sigit (23) from Baturraden; Otniel Tasman (30s) from Banyumas, Sirwan (46) from Somagede. Informants have given their consent to be recorded, hence their words will be used as a source for this research, and their participation in the current study is voluntary.

After collecting the data, the author commenced its analysis. The used technique is comprised of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by (Miles & Huberman, 1992, p.16). Data reduction is about transferring and transforming the rough field data to simpler ones. Data display is to make it concise and systemised in order to better process the information. Lastly, the conclusion drawing bears the true meaning of the data collection or the information of importance for the current study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Quick Look into *Lengger*

Discussing *Lengger's* origins and definitions is complicated matter due to the limited recorded sources and many diverse narratives that surround it. It should be noted that rural arts in Java have oral, dynamic and instinctive traditions, and cultural traditions in Java change almost every 20 kilometres, due to vast variety of norms and values (Irawanto et al., 2011). That's why when composing an account on *lengger*, one should have a wholesome approach, considering the place, the people and the situations surrounding the art, because all the relations happen in the liminal space of dance, where transformations and changes are welcomed (Wels et al., 2011) Despite all these, almost all of my informants said that *lengger* is a traditional dance art form originating from Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. One of the main definitions of *lengger* is associated with the cross-gender nature of the dance (Kholid Mawardi & Nurkholis, 2024).

According to Sirwan (46), *lengger* is a backronym derived from two words, *leng* and *jengger*. He further elaborates that the true meaning of *lengger* is related to the male and female beginning of all people, with *leng* symbolising the female genitalia, meaning the female beginning, and *jengger*, meaning a rooster's comb, or a symbol for a male beginning. Put together, the term should be interpreted as "*dikira perempuan, tetapi ternyata laki-laki*" ("thought to be a woman, turns out it is a man"). This means that a *lengger* is a person, usually a man, who dresses and performs like a woman. In addition, Bagoes (37) shares that nowadays, *lengger* dancers are not only men but women too, even the latter being the majority of performers. On the contrary, Adminah (59) stated that since she has been engaged in the art of *lengger*, in the late 70-ies, all dancers were predominantly female, but there were places, such as Banjarnegara, which were famous for male *lengger* dancers. Nevertheless, it can be summarised that nowadays, *lengger* is an art form that

accommodates both genders, and the gender element of the art is not something that local actors are concerned with, because as revealed by Sunardi (2009) pushing the boundaries through cross-dressing performance is nothing new to Javanese dance ethos.

A second understanding of *lengger* is connected to the entertaining element of the dance. Kartamiharjo (58), a manager of a dance group in Kemangkong, Purbalingga, reveals that for him *lengger* means *lenggak lenggok bikin gejer* or “swaying from left to right causing shock” which associates with the coquettish and sexy moves of the dancers and the astonishment they bring to the audience. Sunaryadi (2000, pp. 32-35) also notes the same thing, but in the region of Wonosobo. Actually, no one besides Kartamiharjo dared to give the same definition for *lengger* in Banyumas. Lastly, *lang*, meaning wandering, and *enggar*, meaning making the heart happy, form a *lengger* that speaks about the happy state of the audience and dancers (Suharno, 1980).

Dance has a strong connection to religion and spirituality as it defines the tempo and dynamics of the dance, which depends on people’s perception of it (Ishiguro, 2022). The same applies to *lengger*. According to Sunaryadi (2000; pp.32-35), its meaning comes from a moral advice that goes *elinga ngger marang Kang Maha Kuasa*, or “Always remember and obey the Almighty.” Sirwan (46) also shared the same piece of information and further added that *lengger* served as a medium for spreading Islam in Java because of the moral messages and Islamic verses that can be found in some of the songs’ lyrics. Bagoes (37) even states that through *lengger* one is able to find the Divine. Otniel Tasman (30s) explained that *lengger* is locked in a spiritual cycle that is based on the idea of *kiblat papat lima pancer*, an ancient philosophy based on the mandala understanding, in which an explanation of the mechanism of the world is illustrated.

Lengger’s Connection to Spirituality

Javanese dances are believed to pos-

sess magical-religious power which is encoded in their myth-based origins (Rahapsari, 2022). *Lengger* is tightly connected to spirituality. This is vividly reflected in the history of the dance as a medium for agricultural ceremonies. According to Rianto (41), *lengger* was born in ancient times, when monotheistic religions were not present in Indonesia, but it was rather a mixture of local (mystique) and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, where offerings and rituals played an important role. That is why it is believed that it was born as a ritual for worshipping the goddess of fertility, Dewi Sri. It functioned as a connecting link between the Earth and Heaven, the purest expression of gratitude for the abundant harvest. Rianto (41) and Sirwan (46) further comment that the performers were comprised solely of men because women were not allowed as they are subject to a monthly menstrual cycle, which is considered unpure to be presented before the Gods. This is just the original myth about the birth of *lengger* and its importance to the locals. In fact, the spiritual aspect of *lengger* is born out of the syncretism between Islam, Hindu-Buddhist, and animistic beliefs, resulting in the emergence of a specific Javanese system of beliefs called *kejawen*, which defines the ways of living for the Javanese (Beatty, 1996). Research has found that *lenggers* is still tied to *kejawen* nowadays. During the author’s field trip, some of the people, such as Sirwan and Adminah, were revealed to be *kejawen* followers. Any information they shared with the author involved the spiritual element concerning this faith. Since both of them have a tight history with *lengger*, it was especially interesting to observe them converse on the differences that emerge from their perspective ways of worship, which only confirms that understanding *lengger* and its spirituality is a subjective process. The conversation that the author witnessed also speaks about how impossible it is to completely trace the spiritual in *lengger* and conclude on only one way of worshipping.

However, it seems that the connec-

tion between the spiritual and *lengger* is slowly becoming less and less relevant. Two of my female informants, Rini (54) and Supartiningsih (41), both actively engaged in the world of *lengger*, with the first being a school dance teacher in Banyumas, and the latter a *lengger* dancer - told me that they are unsure of the connection that exists between *lengger* and the spiritual, and that for them Islam, as the religion they follow, is the only guidance they follow. This shows that even in *lengger* communities there are questions about the *lengger's* spiritual aspect. This means that actually there is a shift in understanding and practising *lengger*, and spirituality is not the primary element of the art, but structure and general on-going religious trends along Java appear to be, as Ishiguro (2022) claims to influence the development of dance in Java. However, through a vigorous participant observation the author witnessed that spirituality in *lengger* is very much alive nowadays, even though not many people practice it, but it is more limited to certain communities, such as dancers and *kejawen* practitioners. This can be proved by looking into the whole process of becoming a *lengger* dancer which is connected to rituals, a spirit called *indhang*, fasting, offerings, holy places and ceremonies that altogether form the inseparable bond between the art and the spirituality.

Becoming a Lengger (dancer) - Theory versus Reality

Becoming a *lengger* dancer is a long and continuous process. The of becoming *lengger* is related to human experience, and notes down a significant transformation in the dancer's life. Happening in the continuum of dance - the dancer transcends to a liminal space where they experiences a change which brings new dynamics in their life. Once the ritual of becoming a *lengger* dancer finishes, they go back with new identity in the structured society (Gennep et al., 1961). As the author found, there are three ways to become a true *lengger* dancer, and all of them share a connection to spirituality.

First one is by having a spirit called *indhang*, the second one is by doing a series of apprenticeships called *magang*, and lastly, by forming a bond with a ghost, or a jinn known as *khodam*. By true *lengger* the author means someone who has gone under at least one of those processes.

Indhang can be defined as a spirit. As Bagoes (37) reveals, *indhang* is a process that involves practice, understanding of the art, controlling feelings and emotions, and knowledge of a number of music and dance accompaniments. Possessing *indhang* results in great stamina and amazing performance that commences as a physical experience, at the end encompasses a person's psychological state. Jumping into trance redefines the boundaries of human experiences in another time and space (Suardi, 2010) It is a supernatural experience, one that combines *batin* and *lahir*. As something supernatural, *indhang* is also a spontaneous rush of emotions, a tingling sensation that every person feels differently. This is confirmed by Supartiningsih (41), who shares:

"It was maghrib when I started crying, I just wanted to dance. There was no practice whatsoever prior to my will to dance. Back then I was seven years old. Suddenly I really wanted to just go on stage and dance *lengger*. My family then lied to me that there is no costume for me, just to make sure that I didn't dance. That did not stop me, I put on a scarf and some make-up and went to the stage. I did not know how to dance *lengger*; everything was just so spontaneous to me. The clock struck 12 midnight, but I was still there, performing, not tired at all. Nobody could take me down from the stage, I refused to go down. I was there until the very last moment".

Sukarmi (57) says that by having *indhang*, the performer looks appealing to the audience and captures all the attention. Sirwan (46) describes further that having an *indhang* has a hypnotising effect on the audience because the *indhang* that has entered the dancer's body is of royal and noble ancestry. He gave an example with Dewi Sekartaji, which is a very important

personage in Javanese mythology. Those of royal and noble ancestry usually lived in the place where the dancer was born and contributed to the development of the community. As Narsih (50s) said, not everyone can establish a connection with *indhang*. The spirit is entitled to make its own choice that best fits its needs. If the spirit really likes the person, they will bestow the person with some kind of ornament, in the case of Narsih, she was given a necklace in her purse, as she recalls:

"I finished my prayer at the holy place of Dewi Sekartaji. I felt happy and there was a boost of emotions. Nothing unusual happened, I have done that so many times before, but just when I reached home, I found that Dewi Sekartaji had bestowed me with a gift, a small necklace. I praise that item so much; it means a lot to me. It symbolises that I indeed possess *indhang*."

Indhang provides balance and harmony in the person's life. According to Otniel Tasman (30s), the spirit can leave the person if it is not taken care of, such as by participating in shows, doing prayer, or visiting holy places. *Indhang* is a connection between a person and a spirit that brings balance to the person's physical and psychological experiences as well as surroundings. An interesting story comes again from Narsih (50s) who eagerly shares the following:

"... This happened a long time ago, when I was still a regular dancer. So, I was invited to a sugar factory to dance for the inauguration of the year's sugar processing just before mixing the sugar and betel. I don't remember the year. They used to invite me each year because of my strong connection with the spirit that resides at the factory. What actually happened once is that the owner of the factory substituted me with another *lengger* dancer, to which the spirit of the factory responded unfriendly, and the mixture of sugar did not start immersing at all. The manufacturing process got delayed. They immediately called me back; apparently, the spirit of the initial owner of the factory, a Dutch landlord, had taken a liking to me! ..."

This reveals a strong connection between the person, the nature and the flow of all processes, and people here in Banyumas, at least those, who are followers of *kejawen* believe very much so.

Unfortunately, during the author's field research the word *indhang* was mentioned during particular discussion of *lengger* and did not have its religious prestige. It seems that in the 21st century the mystic element of *lengger* is slowly losing its relevancy. Bagoes (37) exclaimed that a true *lengger* dancer must possess a connection to the spiritual, to be charismatic, be able to do comedy and sing, as well dance. However, what the author found is that actually the majority of dancers that engage nowadays in *lengger* tend to not possess most of the above-mentioned elements, including a connection to the spiritual realm. So, they are just dancers who learn and perform music and dance of *lengger* for various reasons, such as entertainment and livelihood. Here, the spiritual experience is rejected by them, they are cut from spiritual frame of *lengger* which does not give them the right to call themselves *lengger* dancers, but more of practitioners.

The second way to become a true *lengger* dancer is by following a process known as *magang* (apprenticeship), as Sirwan (46) reveals, hoping to connect with *indhang*. Another name for *magang* is *nguntal*, or following in the steps of an already established true *lengger* dancer. The candidate is addressed as *untal*, and they need to live, help, follow and obey the words of the teacher. After obtaining the initial knowledge, *untal* sets to do a series of activities, such as fasting, bathing in a holy/sacred place, and *midang*, which involves visiting people's houses to seek recognition. Part of the spiritual awakening of the dancer and getting *indhang* is tightly related to the first two activities – fasting, known as *puasa*, and bathing in a holy place.

Javanese people pay special attention to fasting as they believe it is a way to be more balanced, harmonised, true with yourself and responsive to the surrounding environment, and at the same way

pay tribute to religion (Möller, 2015). As Piko (22), a *lengger* dancer, told the author that it is all part of a process called *laku prihatin*. As Rofiq (2024) writes that the *puasa* is done in an attempt to cleanse oneself from all the bad omens. Piko further states that there are many variations of *puasa*: fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, *puasa weton* (fasting on a birthday), *puasa ngas-rep (mutih)* (fasting by eating food that is only white, such as rice), *puasa api* (fasting on foods that are cooked on fire), including not eating rice for 40 days. Sukarmi (57) shares that the food she usually consumed for fasting was cassava, vegetables and fruits that were not processed at all or sometimes only boiled, and she would especially do it before any important show. Interestingly, she shares that nowadays she does no longer commit to *puasa* because of her age. In addition to this, the author also observed that fasting was not a common thing among the members of the *lengger* community. Some of them do it, but they follow their personal moods and do not particularly comply with the tradition. This is due to the fact that *Lengger's* main function of being a sacred dance and medium for ritual has become a medium of entertainment.

Along the fasting process, the candidate needs to take bath in a source of holy water for certain occasions. This water source can be a small river, a cave, the sea, or a creek in the forest, according to what is believed in the area. However, all of these places must be related to a mystical story, usually a legend about a mystical Majapahit (old Javanese kingdom) figure of royal ancestry that meditated or resided there and now comes alive through worshipping of nature and can become visible in different shapes (Wessing; 2006; pp. 18-19). Sukarmi (57) says she used to bathe in a creek with seven different flower buds. The flower buds are selected according to beliefs and seasonal availability. Piko (22) also shared the same experience. However, as the author noticed, following Sirwan's art group, most such practices only involve one type of flower nowadays. Such

practices happen on certain occasions that follow the Javanese calendar, usually before a major performance. Sirwan (46) also shares that as part of a ritual to become *lengger* dancer one needs to pay respect to the grave of the elders (personal and of the village) in order to get their blessing, which helps the dancer to get *karamah* (supernatural wonders, amazing skills) and master a potential relation with *indhang*.

The third way of becoming a *lengger* is by being embraced by a jinn or *khodam*, or forming a sudden spiritual and mystical bond with the spirit of a sacred place. Sigit (23) tells:

"...Back then we were performing *lengger* at *Pancuran Pitu*, and as I was dancing, a figure called mbah Rentik came from above and hugged my body, this is what I have been told. Once she hugged me, my aura became different, more appealing, and more shining. But I never asked for that, and it is not like *indhang*, it just came to me. All I did was to pray. After the performance finished, the spirit went back..."

He further describes it as *khodam*, a spirit of place. He had never seen it before or had any intention of calling. Here Sigit differentiates between *indhang* and *khodam*, by saying that *khodam* actually comes and goes for a certain period of time and there is no need to look for it or taking any care of it. In contrast, *indhang* needs to be cared for. However, in reality, the difference is very tiny and subject to personal beliefs and understandings. The key here is the person who experiences it. This experience is unstructured one, multilayered and free of custom and is not necessarily transferable back to society and its understanding (Wajabula, 2023). This only proves the extreme variability of *lengger* in term of spirituality and how the belief towards the spiritual constantly changes, depending on who is asked. It can be concluded that any touch with a spirit is part of the existential experience of the person.

In a nutshell, this is the process of becoming a *true lengger* dancer in theory. However, as revealed by the author's research, this is not the case in the 21st cen-

tury. Even though there is a great number of dancers who still follow the processions discussed above, less and less of them tend to follow the *lengger* ethos fully. More precisely, they follow it partially – meaning that they adapt their own moods and understandings towards the process of becoming a *lengger* dancer. Because of this decreasing interest in following the *lengger* canon, new generations of *lengger* dancers also do not follow it. In fact, they just straight away jump into the *lengger* artistry after mastering one or two dances. This is due to the fact that nowadays, *lengger* is taught in school and private lessons, and its natural way of becoming proficient in it has become a rare sight. More and more people see it as a source of entertainment and a way of making money, which only diminishes its relationship to spirituality. This is completely normal because, as mentioned above, the dance is dynamic and was created for the people from the people, and it is only natural for its set of rules to change over time (McNamara, 1994). Nowadays, almost everyone can become a *lengger* dancer if they learn some repertoire and are brave enough to be on stage. Nevertheless, spiritual practices are still present in *lengger* and even though not as popular as before, they remain an integral part of the the art's existence.

Holy Places, Offerings and Ceremonies

The spiritual element of a *lengger* is not only found in the idea of becoming a *lengger*, but also in the whole process of preparing for the performance and its execution. Two major components are – visiting a holy place, buying offerings, as Sirwan (46) and Bagoes (37) revealed. Following this, the author will share his notes from his participant-observation activities, following Sirwan during the preparation for his troupe's performances. This particular description is from Dewi Sekartaji's *petilasan*, a holy place, a stop where a sacred figure spent time meditating and living.

The visit of a holy place is associated with asking for a permission from the *leluhur* (ancestors) of the place where the

dancers live or the place where the performance takes place, and seeking blessing for a smooth and unproblematic show. One can go to this sacred place whenever they feel the urge to, prior to a performance, to seek tranquillity or answers or just visit. The preferred time to do that is during special dates of the Javanese calendar known as *jumat wage* and *kamis kliwon*, as examples. It is believed that on those dates the spiritual element of the surroundings, especially its energy is on peak levels, and a better connection to the unseen world can be established. The pilgrimage is done at night, usually around 11 or 12 o'clock in the night for the utmost experience, however, daily visits are also accepted. A *petilasan* is located close to the village, in a place covered with greenery, moist, and close to a river. Every *petilasan* looks different and has one *juru kunci*, a person responsible for the place. The community also helps in the maintenance of the place. The one that the author visited is of Dewi Sekartaji (Figure 1), which resembles a small abode.



Figure 1. *Petilasan Dewi Sekartaji*, accompanying Sirwan and Narsih. [Author's personal archive, 27 November 2022]

Inside there is a huge stone, where locals believe that Dewi Sekartaji did her meditation and the actual place of sacrality. It is all covered in *dupa*, incenses, and flowers – all a symbol for respect. All the guests pay their respect with a short prayer (Figure 2) one after the other, while the others talk outside while tidying the place.



Figure 2. *Petilasan Dewi Sekartaji*, Narsih praying. Author's personal archive, 27 November 2022]

After all finish praying, they go to the creek to wash their hands and faces (sometimes bathe fully if it is a special occasion) with the river water which they consider holy. In some occasion they will use traditional Javanese clothing, such as *jarit* (Figure 3). The bathing can be done alone or with the help of someone. After all this is done, the group heads back to chit chat and have some snacks and coffee.



Figure 3. *Petilasan Dewi Sekartaji*, Piko taking a bath in *jarit*. Author's personal archive, 11 November 2022]

Besides taking a bath in a holy water, prior to going on stage, Sirwan needs to make sure that all the needed offerings, or *sesajen*, are bought. In order to do that he buys them himself usually in the morning or several hours before the performances.

There is no strict list of offerings that need to be present, but Sirwan (46) believes that the more offerings equal a better connection to the ancestors, as well as more choices for them to select. The author accompanied him on numerous times to buy offerings. The offerings can be different depending on what the ones having the event believes. Some of the offerings include *mawar putih* (white rose), *mawar merah* (red rose), *bunga kanti* (white champaca), *kemenyen* (benzoin), *minyak duyung* (aromatic oil), *dupa* (incenses), *ramesan* (plate with foods), *air putih* (water), *air daun dadap* (water with erythrina leaves), *air daun salam* (water with bay leaves), *kopi pahit* (bitter coffee), *teh tawar* (tea with no sugar), *kelapa muda* (coconut), and *pisang* (bananas) (see Figure 4). The person who is responsible for buying the offerings needs to make sure there is an abundance of choices for the ancestors. Hartono et al. (2021) compares the offerings procession as a ritual of its own, thus emphasizing on its importance.



Figure 4. Set of offerings in a performance in Somagede, Banyumas, as part of the performance of *lengger* Author's personal archive, 11 November 2022]

According to Sirwan's (46) interpretation, the flowers have a synergetic function because of its aroma which brings the dancer closer to the nature. The foods represent a healthy body, prosperity and well-being, while the drinks are symbol of life. The incense and the benzoin function as a medium, trying to bring the dancers spiritually closer to nature by making their

senses more open, susceptible to the surroundings. They also serve as means of mediation because of their smell they create a special atmosphere where the borderline between the spiritual and reality is tiny, and spirits can become part of the world of the dancers. On some occasions, the offerings are consummated by a dancer if a spirit of ancestor (*kodham* or *indhang*) desires to taste something. If there are any leftovers after the performance ends, people can consume all the offerings as it is believed that they bring good omen.

Lastly, *lengger*'s connection with the spiritual can be found in the art's function to serve as medium for different rituals and ceremonies. Walton (2007) writes that the performative arts tend to bring both worlds together and establish a deep connection. These rituals and ceremonies are pertinent to the *kejawen* and Islam circles and are popular in villages outside the big city. The most popular ones include *baritan*, *bersih desa*, *kaulan*, and *marungan*.

Baritan or also known as *memetri bumi* is a traditional Javanese ceremony which is done to express respect to God and ancestors through an agricultural ceremony that seeks protection for the harvest. The idea of the *baritan* is that through a show of music and dance, people and the spirits build a connection with God. Every area holds *baritan* differently, but usually just before the rainy season and at a place that is holy for the community. Rudi (52), the head of Tambak village in Sumpiuh, shares about *baritan* in his area:

"There is a special place here in Tambak: a small reservoir that we believe is the residence of an ancestor of our community. Each year we hold a *lengger* performance usually before planting the crops. We build a small and simple bamboo stage in the middle of the rice field, next to the reservoir. All the women cook, so we have an abundance of food. We gather there in the morning before the middle day prayer. All finishes with eating together. All people are welcome."

For *baritan*, everything about *lengger* and the connection to the spiritual is simple. Dancers wear traditional attire and

dance on a carpet under a tent for roughly 20 minutes with a song or *gendhing* that locals believe is the favourite of the spirit of ancestors that resides in the area. Preparation is needed, but not as much as a usual four-hours performance. Locals are seated around, patiently waiting for the food, which is believed to be blessed by the spirit of the place. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. *Lengger* dancers in *baritan*. Tambak, Sumpiuh [Author's personal archive, 26 September 2023]

Bersih desa is an annual ceremony conducted in villages across Banyumas with hopes to tame any evil spirits that reside in the village. This ceremony is also done to pay respect to ancestor of the place and ask for mercy and protection from any natural disasters, says Sirwan (46). Every *bersih desa* is a subject to local beliefs and understandings. The author, along Rianto (41) and Sigit (23) visited a cemetery in Kalliori, Banyumas as a part of *bersih desa*. It is believed that a dance by skilful *lengger* dancers eases the souls of the dead while seeking protection. Another story from Rudi (52) says that in his place the *bersih desa* ceremony includes a full night of *lengger* performance to sooth the souls of the ancestor who supposedly are expected to enjoy the performance and come to live once again through dance. Some of those

souls of ancestors can even dance through the bodies of the dancers. It is only the next day the community pays tribute to the dead. Depending on the village a cleaning process takes place, before or after the *lengger* events.

In the tradition of *kaulan* also known as *nadzar* a *lengger* performance is held as part of a promise between a dancer and a person. The terms translated means *keeping one's promise*. Sirwan (46) and Kartamiharjo (58) further elaborate that usually this is a promise by a member of a family made to a *lengger* dancer that they will invite (*nangkap*) the dancer to perform, hold a full night performance, if something good happens to the family, for example: a baby is born, their child is accepted into the desired school, or even for birthday or circumcision. It is expected that all good things will happen if the person keeps their promise. The author has witness one such performance in Pegalongan on 8 January 2023 when he was invited by Narsih. It is good to mention that *nadzar* appears for a moment during the evening performance. The main dancer, in the author's case – Narsih, announces it and the person who made the promise come to the stage. A plate with raw rice and several leaves of *janur* are prepared. The rice is placed over the *janur*. Both persons take the end of each leaf and get ready, waiting for an indication from one of the musicians. On the count from one to three and the musicians calling *Allahu Akbar*, they pull the leaf and all the rice scatters to all directions. If someone catches some of the rice, it is said that they shall have prosperity (Figure 6).

In those ceremonies it is also very common for new mothers to bring their children to the *lengger* dancer for them to kiss/sniff the baby as a blessing. People believe that the child will be protected and succeed in life. There is no special pause for that, the mother or the nanny of the baby just goes to the stage and has the baby kissed. In return for their blessing, the *lengger* dancer receives a small tip (Figure 7).



Figure 6. *Lengger* as part of *kaulan* tradition. Narsih and the hosts of the event, which was a wedding. Author's personal archive, 8 January 2023]



Figure 7. *Lengger* as part of *kaulan* tradition. Narsih and the hosts of the event, which was a wedding. Author's personal archive, 8 January 2023]

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was not only to present an account of *lengger's* spiritual aspect, but also to point out that it is very much relevant in the 21st century, especially in provincial areas (villages) across Banyumas. Albeit the fast-changing nature of Banyumas culture, the art managed to preserve its connection to the spiritual and God. This research, that was mainly

conducted in 2023, confirms that and further elaborates that the spiritual element of *lengger* is still present in every step and performance of the *lengger* ethos, even though the level of spiritual connection is not as strong as before.

As a variant of the *play*, a very basic element of human culture, *lengger* as a dance forms relations between the people and the spiritual. It has been the connecting link between people's beliefs and their understanding of God. It has grown to become an inseparable part of the events scene in Banyumas - from being an important dance for agricultural ceremonies to even a source of blessing for newly born children. Besides the connection between the people and God, *lengger* also encourages the lived experience in the dancer through a series of spiritual events relating to becoming a *lengger*, attending rituals, and mastering the spirit of *indhang*. Belief, open mind, patience are only some of the characteristics one needs to face through the process of understanding and learning *lengger*, which welcomes all genders.

Lengger holds a special place in the social structure of Banyumas. On one hand it is recognised as a source of entertainment for numerous events, but on the other side it is part of a series of events related to the social organisation, lived experience and spiritual understanding of the society. Its long history, dynamic existence and flexibility resonates with the long trajectory of the Banyumas society. One of these strong resemblances is the connection between people, *lengger* and the spiritual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author extends his gratitude to his academic supervisors - Pande Made Kutanegara and Gabriel Roosmargo Lono Lastoro Simatupang of the Universitas Gadjah Mada for the guidance, patience and advice during the composition of this paper.

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