



Meaning of Lesung in Thek Thok Gung Dance Work

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Abstract

Thek Thok Gung is a new creation dance created by Suryani Dwi Astuti and Lina Puspitasari inspired by the activity of togetherness behind the beating of mortar. The activity referred to in this dance work is the activity of togetherness in the ritual of searching for missing people since pre-colonial times. In this dance work, the use of lesung becomes a bridge between practical and symbolic functions, between work and celebration, between the past and the present. This research aims to describe the form and meaning of lesung in Thek Thok Gung dance work. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The theory used to answer the problem of form uses the theory of form according to Y. Sumandiyo Hadi. The disclosure of meaning in this study uses the theory of "Ēstetika Paradoks" by Jacob Sumardjo. This research uses a choreographic approach. The research steps taken in collecting data were obtained through observation, interviews, and literature studies. The results show that Thek Thok Gung dance work consists of elements of dance form, namely dance title, dance theme, type or type of dance, mode or way of presentation, dancers, movement, space, dance music, makeup and clothing, property, and lighting. The meaning of beating the mortar is a symbol and ritual that is believed to affect reality. Its aesthetics are not in the form of visual or sound beauty, but in symbolic and spiritual functions.

INTRODUCTION

The creation process of the dance work titled *Thek Thok Gung* was inspired by the activity of pounding rice in a *lesung* (giant mortar), this activity implies a sense of togetherness. *Thek Thok Gung* dance is also a way to search missing people by beating a *lesung*.

The agricultural world of Nusantara recognizes a tool called *lesung*. Etymologically, the word *lesung* comes from a Javanese word, which is a derived word from the old Javanese word *lèsun*. In its original meaning, *lèsun* means *lumping* or a large wooden trough used for pounding rice, to separate the husks from the grain. The shape is elongated and concave in the center, resembling a trough. This tool is used alongside the *alu* (big pestle) in traditional activities, making it an important part of the life cycle of farming societies (Balai, Sumatera, Penyalia, & Purnomo, n.d.).

In the agrarian culture of Nusantara, *lesung* is known as a traditional tool used to pound rice. However, in certain cultural practices, the *lesung* is more than just a utilitarian object. *Lesung* also has a strong spiritual dimension, it is even used in missing persons rituals. The tradition of beating the *lesung* at night to “call” people who are missing shows that the *lesung* not only functions physically, but also acts as a symbolic medium to connect the world of humans and the world of spirits (Istiandini, Tindarika, & Sulissusiawan, 2022)

The phenomenon reflects what Jakop Sumardjo describes as paradoxical aesthetics, a cultural approach that does not separate the real world and the mystical world, but sees them as a harmonious unity. In paradox aesthetics, Sumardjo explained that traditional Indonesian society has a symbolic and mythological way of thinking that allows an object such as *lesung* to have two functions at once, functional and spiritual, logical and symbolic, real and supernatural (Sri Sutrianti, 2022).

More than its mythological meaning, *lesung* is also a symbol of struggles over identity and spirituality, involving the relationship between controlling and being controlled. The shape that resembles a bowl or a long cup, is a symbol of *yonis*, which to this day is known to represent the female genitalia.

The rhythm that is created in the *alu-lesung* pounding process is the result of the soul agreement of the pounders, as well as the agreement between humans and nature. It becomes music, which is exhilarating, that creates integration between economic, social, cultural, and even spiritual activities. How beautiful, relaxing, and peaceful when the pounding process is still happening. The rice pounders chat, tell jokes, and share stories. Togetherness and emotional connection make the rural atmosphere warm and harmonious. However, over time, the *alu-lesung* activity was replaced with advanced machine tools to pound rice and other crops. To maintain *lesung-alu* activities, the community changed the function of *lesung-alu*, which was originally used to pound field crops. It is now one of the local traditional arts, which is called *Gejog Lesung*. (Musfikoh, Permanasari, & Lestari, 2022).

Gejog Lesung is a performing art that uses *lesung* and *alu* as musical instruments by playing them like pounding rice. This performing art is usually played by women. However, in some regions, men also participate in playing *Gejog Lesung* because of limited manpower, considering that moving *lesung* from its place to the performance venue requires a lot of energy and strength. (Situs & Sangiran, n.d.). The creation of “*Thek Thok Gung*” was inspired by the importance of togetherness behind *lesung* activities. This 11-minute dance work is performed by ten people. two main dancers, one *sindhen* who also dances, and seven male dancers who also play music for “*Thek Thok Gung*”. The choreography in

“*Thek Thok Gung*” is inspired by several community activities that are identical to *lesung*, such as community in mutual cooperation and the activities of women in the village; such as separating the husks and rice (*napeni*) and playing with *alu*. It also portrays a mystical or spiritual atmosphere of beating *lesung* that is used as a medium to search missing people. A *gecul* ambience also fills “*Thek Thok Gung*” in certain parts, and uses *lesung* as musical accompaniment.

This dance work has a unique meaning to be studied. This research focuses on the dance form, such as dance title, dance theme, type or variety of dance, mode or a way of presentation, dancers, movement, space, dance music, make up, costumes, and lighting. It also examines the deeper meaning of *lesung* as a medium to find missing people.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method applied in this research is qualitative, as this research describes and analyzes the data objectively. Objective based on existing facts then describe descriptively about the form and meaning of *lesung* in “*Thek Thok Gung*”.

Data Collection Techniques The data for this research was collected through three main techniques : Observation, interviews, and literature study (Slamet, 2017). The research steps taken in collecting data process are observation, interview, and literature study. Researchers conducted interviews to gather information about the meaning of *lesung* at the residence of Mr. F. Hari Mulyatno, as he is well known as an experienced person in *lesung* in Bonoroto, Karanganyar. He was chosen as a source because researchers needed information about the meanings of beating *lesung* in “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance, which could not be obtained through the observation method. The result obtained after the interview were the meaning of *lesung*, to the spiritual activities behind *lesung*, which is used as a medium to search for missing people. Moreover, researchers also got complete data needed in the research process of this scientific work.

Data presentation in qualitative research is most often used to present data with narrative text (Sugiono, 2014, p. 341). Researchers present data in a descriptive form, and images to clarify

research data. Researchers describe “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance form which includes the dance title, dance theme, type or variety of dance, mode or a way of presentation, dancers, movement, space, dance music, make up, costumes, and lighting. The researchers also explained the meaning of *lesung* as a work idea in this dance work, which focuses on the togetherness and the spiritual belief in the sound of *lesung* to find missing people.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Form of the Dance Work “*Thek Thok Gung*”

Dance is part of culture that is expressed in performing arts. This research requires concepts and theories to answer and examine the problems that have been defined. “*Thek Thok Gung*” is a new dance work with the idea of the inherent meaning of togetherness and spiritual activities behind *lesung* activity. The dance work “*Thek Thok Gung*” has a dance form, the explanation is described using the theory of Y. Sumandiyo Hadi. According to Hadi, the elements of dance form consist of dance title, dance theme, type or variety of dance, mode or way of presentation, dancers, movements, space, dance music, make up and costumes, property, and lighting (Hadi, 2003). These elements are used to analyze the form of the “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance work. The following explain the elements of “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance form.

Dance Title

According to Hadi, the title is a sign of initials, and usually also related to the dance theme (2003) . The word *thek thok gung* is taken from the sound the *lesung* when it is played, which produces the sounds *thek* and *thok*. In this case, the words *thek thok* represent the sounds of the *lesung* that not just rhythmic, but also full of meaning. This dance work tells the meaning lies behind the sound, describing the life of the village community, the spirit of working together, and traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. In the past, the sound of the beating *lesung* was also used as a traditional communication medium, it is also used to search for missing people by attracting the attention of local residents

through a distinctive rhythm that could be heard from a distance. On the other hand, the word *gung* comes from the sound of a gong, which in the culture of rural communities serves as an energizer and sign to start activities, such as traditional ceremonies, art performances, or *gotong royong* activities. Thus, the term *thek thok gung* represents the rhythm, also meaning and collective spirit of rural communities.

Dance Theme

According to Hadi, dance theme is considered as the subject matter that contains certain content or meaning of a choreography, both literal and non-literal (Hadi, 2003). Dance themes are ideas or motivations that exist in the form of dance works (Soedarsono, 1975). Ideas or motivations can be taken from story sources, events that have been experienced, or phenomena in the surrounding environment. The theme of “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance is the deeper meaning of beating the *lesung*, togetherness and spirituality.

Type or Variety of Dance

According to Hadi, dance types can be clarified to distinguish various forms of dance or choreographic work, he divides types into several main categories, such as traditional classical dance, folk tradition dance, modern dance or new creations, and ethnic dance types (2003).

“*Thek Thok Gung*” is a new creation dance with a folk theme. In other words, new creation dance is a dance developed from traditional dance but with some innovations that are not bound by the standards rules of traditional dance. This is because the movements are more free but still reflect the spirit of the folk, the themes are related to the daily life of the village community or local traditions, musical accompaniment, clothing, and expressions.

Presentation Mode

According to Hadi the presentation mode of choreographers can essentially be divided into two completely different presentations, which are symbolic and representational (2003). “*Thek Thok Gung*” uses a representational mode of presentation.

The characteristics of this presentation mode in the “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance are the activities of *nutu*, *nepeni*, and presenting the activities of rural people.

Dancer

According to Hadi the number and gender of the dancers are very important in terms of group choreography. Dancers are one of the most important elements in a dance work (2003).

“*Thek Thok Gung*” is a group composition involving ten dancers. The number of dancers consists of three female dancers and eight male dancers. The male dancers also play the music, and there is one woman as *sindhen* but she also included in the performance. The selection of ten dancers is a consideration for this work, because it relates to the variety of spatial arrangements floor patterns, and transitions needed in the work.

Movement

According to Hadi the *garap* concept of dance movement can explain the motion used in choreography, for example from classical dance, or popular tradition, modern dance, or new creation (Hadi, 2003). The choreography in “*Thek Thok Gung*” is inspired by several community activities that are identical to *lesung*, such as community in cooperation and the activities of women in the village, such as separating the husks and rice (*nepeni*) and playing with *alu*. It also portrays a mystical or spiritual atmosphere of beating a *lesung* that is used as a medium to search for missing people. A *gecul* ambience also fills “*Thek Thok Gung*” in certain parts, and uses *lesung* as musical accompaniment. This choreography was then re-explored and collaborated with some basic *sekarang* of Loro Blonyo dance, such as *pacak gulu*, *pendapan*, and *lumaksana*. This is the basis for composing the movement patterns and dance dynamics in the “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance work. Each movement presented in each scene has a variety of movements that are adapted to the concept described below.

First Scene

This scene depicts the atmosphere of *gotong royong*, harmony, high social consciousness behind the activity of pounding rice with a *lesung*, not forgetting the typical *gecul* characteristics of the village community also as a reference for this scene, so the movements presented are *rampak* movements.

Second Scene

This scene depicts a mystical atmosphere, the chaotic atmosphere of searching missing people. This scene uses basic movements of the Loro Blonyo dance sequence as the basis for the work in this scene, but are re-explored such as playing the intensive tempo of the movements.

Third Scene

This scene depicts the atmosphere of joy and sorrow of the village community for the return of the people they are looking for, the movement in this scene tends to be more energetic, and as an ending to close the atmosphere of the village community, it is brought back in this scene.

Space

Dance space can be divided into two categories, stage space and movement space. Stage space is a place used by dancers to present their work. Movement space is a space that is formed due to the movement of dancers. Motion space can be divided into several parts, such as the space that arises from motion motifs, levels, formations, and floor directions or patterns (Hadi, 2003).

The dance space that emerges from the motion motifs of “*Thek Thok Gung*” has a large volume, because the choreographer can place dancers asymmetrically, spread out, or move between stage points. The stage levels used in “*Thek Thok Gung*” are low and high. Formations and directions are front, back, side, and circular. The floor patterns used are diagonal and random.

Music

According to Hadi music as a dance element is in accordance with the rhythmic accompaniment of the movement, or viewed from the point of dance, the

movement only requires rhythmic pressure with the music without any other pretense (2003). Music is the main medium that supports the course of a work and music is an important supporting element for achieving the atmosphere in conveying the feeling of dance content.

The music presented in “*Thek Thok Gung*” has the concept of *Gejog Lesung* music collaborated with other instruments, *terbang*, *djembe*, *dongkretek*, *rontek*, *kempul*, and *bendhe*. These musical instruments is dominantly percussion instruments so that the atmosphere of joy and sorrow is clearly conveyed in the “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance work. Aside from that, there is a *dongkretek* in this dance work, because *dongkretek* was (formerly in Madiun, East Jawa) used as a medium to find missing people to strengthen the idea of “*Thek Thok Gung*”, that is also depicts the ritual to find missing people in Java in general. The music presented in each scene has an ambience that is built differently to be build the audience emotions and invite the audience to understand the content of the work.

Each scene is presented with the accompaniment of music, which is explained as follows. In this scene, the music presented begins with *bendhe* (as it replaces the role of *gong*) and an encouraging *tembangan* to depict the spirit of *gotong royong* of the village community, then continued with the collaboration of *gejog lesung*, *kempul*, and *rontek* so that the atmosphere of *gotong royong* even more conveyed. In this scene, the music is dominated by *dongkretek* music, so that the mystical or spiritual ambience as the main part of finding the missing people is conveyed, but also collaborated with *terbang* and *kempul*. Third Scene, in this scene, the music presented is a collaboration of all musical instruments, *dongkretek*, *terbang*, *jimbe*, and *kempul*, played with musical rhythms to depict a joy and sorrow ambience.

Makeup

According to Hadi, when choreography has been presented as a whole form of performance art, makeup is one of the dance elements to support a dancer's appearance on stage (2003). The makeup used in “*Thek Thok Gung*” dance is corrective makeup

(beauty makeup). On the other hand, male dancers in this work only use compact powder and lip balm to look less pale. Hair styling on female dancers is *cepol* buns, to present a neat and graceful look of villagers.



Figure 1. Makeup of female dancers
(Source: "Thek Thok Gung", January 10, 2025).

Costume

The costumes or clothes that are worn by dancers and *sindhen* are *old kutu baru kebaya* with *kawung* motifs *jarik* used only three-quarters of the piece to underline the populist atmosphere of the village community. In the other hand, male musicians are wearing *lurik* tops, *gembyong* pants, and *ikets* to look authentic to the village farmers.



Figure 2. Female dancers' costumes
(Source: Thek Thok Gung, Januari 10, 2025)



Figure 3. Male dancers' costume
(Source: Thek Thok Gung, Januari 10, 2025)

Property

According to Hadi if a dance uses special dance properties or equipment and contains important meaning in the dance presentation, it can be conceptually explained in dance notes (2003). In this dance work, *alu* is used as a dance property, because this tool has a strong symbolic value as part of the tradition of pounding rice and can produce rhythmic sounds that characterize this dance work.

Lighting

According to Hadi, the role of lighting in the performance is very important as a supporter (2003). Lighting exists in a performance arts to create the desired impression or depiction. In this dance work, the artist uses a type of general lighting with dominant colors of yellow, blue, and warm tones to complement the concept of a rural setting.

The Meaning of Lesung in Thek Thok Gung Dance Work

As Sumardjo explains in his book *Paradoxical Aesthetics*, there are patterns of relationship that build certain meanings in every culture of a society. Furthermore, Sumardjo explained that the pattern or system of meaningful relationship rests on the human view that everything exists as a pair that identifies itself, exemplifies, complements, even though the substance is opposite or contradictory (Istiandini et al., 2022).

In *Paradoxical Aesthetics*, Sumardjo elaborates on how various mindsets (pattern two, three, four and five) are used to unite seemingly contradictory elements in the local culture. Aesthetics in this context is not just about visual beauty, but also about symbolic

harmony and its cultural function.

"The aesthetics of pattern three focuses on the formation of paradoxical symbols in the form of a 'middle world' that harmonizes all dualistic antagonistic things. The upper world and the lower world unite in the middle world" (Sumardjo, 2014).

In this quote Sumardjo explains that traditional Indonesian society understands reality through a cosmological structure consists of three layers: the lower world (nature), the middle world (humans), and the upper world (God or spirit). The middle world serves as a link that harmonizes the duality between the underworld and the upper world, creating a harmonious unity of opposite elements. This concept reflects how traditional societies do not strictly separate the real and mystical worlds, but rather see them as part of a complementary whole.

In the "*Thek Thok Gung*" dance in the first and third scenes, the third mindset in paradoxical aesthetic is very relevant to use, because this pattern presents harmony between different elements, both physical and symbolic, which form a unified whole.

This triadic pattern reflects the spirit of togetherness, cohesiveness, and synergy between individuals, communities, and the environment, as reflected in the activity of beating the *lesung*, and pushing the *lesung* together when it is about to be used. This pattern illustrates harmony between different elements, and creates social unity. For example, in the first scene, the villagers gather to pound rice together, it is not just physical labor, but a social ritual that unites individuals-communitature(Djawas,2017).

In the first and third scenes, the *Thek Thok Gung* dance work clearly displays a paradoxical aesthetic in the use of the *lesung* as a utilitarian object that is functional but has a social meaning. When the dancers enter by pushing the *lesung* together, then pounding the rice, in this context it also becomes a medium of communication between residents, creating harmony, togetherness, kinship, and the value of *guyub rukun* which is deeply rooted in the agrarian culture of the Nusantara.

In Sumardjo's paradoxical aesthetic framework (2014), *lesung* as a medium for searching the missing people is believed to be

a mystical medium that have spiritual power, entering into the fourth mindset, because *lesung* in a mystical context does not only function as a physical tool (utilitarian), but has entered into symbolic system related to direction, bridge of the upper-lower world, and invincible forces. The pattern of four units all directions (north-south-east-west), the relationship between humans, nature, and the spirit world (Rosliani, n.d.).

In the second scene of the *Thek Thok Gung* dance work, the paradoxical aesthetics are very clearly illustrated when the dancers surround the *lesung* and then spread into various directions; the movements are also presented by the movement of the *Loro Blonyo* dance with its mystical characteristics, which is a form of representation of finding the missing people. The missing people are being summoned with the *lesung* media when the dancers surround the *lesung*, and each of them plays a musical instrument, it symbolizing that these villagers are summoning the missing people. There is also a tense atmosphere when the procession searching for the missing people is performed.

Paradox is also presented in this scene when the two dancers hop on the *lesung*, because women are not allowed to hop on the *lesung*; this is presented because the choreographer wants to bring in his sense of aesthetics. The Tradition of beating the *lesung* in the context of searching for missing people is not an empty act, but a cultural practice full of symbolic and spiritual meanings. In the paradoxical aesthetic view suggested by Sumardjo, this action reflects the mindset of the Nusantara's traditional society that does not rigidly separate the real world and the mystical world. *Lesung*, as a utilitarian object used to pound rice, transforms meaning when used as a ritual medium.

The sound produced by the *lesung* is believed to be able to cross the boundary between the human realm and the supernatural realm, becoming a "call" for the spirit or soul of a lost person to return. A paradox arises when a profane household tool becomes a sacred means of spiritual communication. This is the essence of paradoxical aesthetics, the union between practical function and spiritual function,

between rational logic and mythological belief. Its aesthetic symbolization of the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and invisible forces (Fatimah, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Thek Thok Gung dance work by Suryani Dwi Astuti and Lina Puspitasari is a form of representation of several activities behind the *lesung*. There are *gotong royong*, togetherness, and spiritual activities. The elements of *gecul* and togetherness become a common thread in this dance work. In Thek Thok Gung, *lesung* is the main medium as inspiration for the creation of Thek Thok Gung dance works. This dance work is also an inspiration for the music. Apart from being a form of community cooperation and solidarity, the activity behind the *lesung* also contains a deep spiritual meaning, where every movement and rhythmic sound produced symbolizes the harmony between humans, nature, and cosmic forces.

In the context of Thek Thok Gung dance work, *lesung* becomes a strong symbol of paradoxical aesthetics, presenting two main meanings at once, first as a working tool that builds togetherness and social harmony, and second as a mystical object that is believed to have spiritual power when it is played. This dance work not only revives these traditional values, but also illustrates the ritual and spiritual dimensions inherent in agrarian culture. This dance work is danced by ten dancers and the dancers in this dance work are also musicians.

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