



The Pros and Cons of Lengger Lanang in Banyumas Society

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Abstract

This research examines the pros and cons and the existence of Lengger Lanang dance in Banyumas society today. Lengger Lanang is a traditional dance in which male dancers dress as women, which has its roots in the Dutch colonial period. Using descriptive-analytical qualitative method with snowball sampling technique, this research conducted interviews with dance studio owners and lengger house managers. The results showed that there are pro and contra views towards Lengger Lanang in the community. The pros see it as a cultural heritage that should be preserved, while the cons are concerned about the moral and religious aspects. This controversy impacts the existence of Lengger Lanang, with a decline in preservation and training efforts. To address the controversy, strategies such as providing understanding to young dancers and efforts to embrace dancers experiencing gender identity change are proposed. This research reveals the complexity of gender and sexuality issues in the context of traditional arts, as well as the tension between cultural preservation and changing social values. Despite the challenges, there are still efforts to preserve and adapt these dances to remain relevant in contemporary society.

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INTRODUCTION

A society is a group of individuals living in a specific place, interacting with one another over a relatively long period, having certain customs and rules, and gradually forming a culture (Rafiq, 2020). The Banyumas community is a group of individuals residing in the Banyumas area. Banyumas is located between coordinates 108°39'17" E to 109°27'15" E and 7°15'05" S to 7°37'10" S. The region of Banyumas borders Tegal and Pemalang to the north, Cilacap to the south, Cilacap and Brebes to the west, and Purbalingga, Kebumen, and Banjarnegara to the east. According to Rizki and Lestari (2021), based on its geographical location, Banyumas Regency has varied conditions across its different parts. This variation likely contributes to the cultural and artistic diversity within Banyumas. One particularly interesting art form is "lengger lanang."

The origin of the term "lengger" remains debated. Some argue that "lengger" is a combination of "leng" (hole) and "ngger," referring to a rooster's comb, symbolizing the relationship between a hole (vagina) and male genitalia. Lengger lanang has unique characteristics and embodies cultural values, such as aesthetic value, ancestral reverence, the value of struggle, humanity, and honesty. Lengger art, oriented towards worship rituals, fundamentally aims to perform traditional local cultural rituals. These rituals are part of daily events and an expression of gratitude for the natural resources as a source of life. Rituals are conducted to sanctify customs, as lengger performances were historically held during harvests to thank the Goddess of Fertility (Noviansah et al., 2023; Wicaksono, 2022). The lengger dance is a cultural expression that has grown and developed in Banyumas' agrarian society since ancient times.

Lengger lanang is estimated to have developed since 1755 (Safitri, 2023). Beyond just a dance, lengger holds philosophical meanings, especially relevant in addressing gender inequality challenges in Indonesia, as this art form features male dancers dressed in female attire. This aspect has led to ongoing debates about lengger lanang within the Banyumas community.

Pro arguments are supportive, while contra arguments express disapproval (Achmad Firmansyah, 2023). These debates are crucial daily as they help consider arguments from both sides to reach better solutions. The presence of lengger lanang in the Banyumas community also faces pro and contra arguments. Male dancers who are graceful and resemble women are viewed as deviations, making lengger lanang subject to community debates. Some people perceive lengger lanang as entertainment, while others see it as violating norms. Various community rejections and lack of specific government support threaten the extinction of cross-gender culture in Indonesia, including Lengger Lanang (Islami et al., 2022). These views impact the existence of lengger lanang in Banyumas society today. The perception that lengger lanang defies male nature influences the number of lengger lanang dancers in Banyumas. Only about 12 dancers remain, as some have stopped due to community pressure and bans (Islami et al., 2022). This perception also affects the existence of lengger lanang in Banyumas society.

Existence means "being." According to Durkheim in existential philosophy, existence is given a new meaning as the living movement of concrete humans (Marsiana & Arsih, 2018). Based on these concepts and theories, existence is a continuous activity that evolves with time dynamics. The

existence discussed in this research involves training activities and performances.

This research is related to public perceptions of lengger lanang, similar to the study by Raharjo et al. (2022). That study discussed the cross-gender cultural identity of lengger lanang, the identity negotiation of the dancers, marginalization experienced by lengger lanang, and the community's labels for lengger lanang. However, it only touched on efforts to negotiate the dancers' identities based on societal gender stereotypes without linking them to community beliefs. Another study with a similar theme was conducted by Setyawati (2021), discussing Islamic negotiations within Banyumas' lengger ritual culture. That study addressed the pro and contra views of lengger lanang in society, focusing on rituals containing Islamic elements. However, it did not specifically address the forms of lengger lanang that receive public pro and contra responses. The discussion only explained the rituals considered deviations without detailing the pro and contra arguments regarding lengger lanang art.

Based on previous studies, this research offers new insights into the pro and contra aspects of lengger lanang and its existence in Banyumas society today. By understanding these debates, solutions can be found to sustain lengger lanang's existence without causing excessive controversy.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method employed is qualitative descriptive-analytic research. Descriptive research aims to highlight conditions to obtain data, which is then analyzed and presented in a research report to describe the situation accurately (Mahfuri & Hasan Bisri, 2019).

The technique for selecting informants in this research is snowball sampling. The snowball sampling method is a multi-stage approach based on the analogy of a snowball. It begins with a few people or issues and then expands based on relationships with informants. Snowball sampling asks the initial informants to recommend other informants who meet the research criteria. The first interview was conducted at Sanggar Sekar Endah in Desa Karangturi, Kecamatan Pabuaran, Kabupaten Banyumas. During this interview, the informants directed the researcher to conduct further interviews with the next informants at Rumah Lengger. Subsequent interviews were conducted at Rumah Lengger, located within the Alun-alun Kota Lama Banyumas area. This research also includes secondary informants, who are representatives of the community opposed to Lengger Lanang, to validate the interview results from the primary informants.

The qualitative data collection technique is tentative, as its use is determined by the problem context and the type of data sought (Harahap, 2020). The data used in this research consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through interviews with Sanggar Sekar Endah's owner and Rumah Lengger's manager. Secondary data was obtained through photos, documents such as journals, and objects that can complement the primary data. The technique used to analyze the research data is interactive analysis, aimed at providing more detailed information and ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the research results. The stages in the analysis process include data collection, data presentation, and conclusion (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pro and Contra of Lengger Lanang in Banyumas Society Today

During the Dutch colonial period, Indonesian women often performed welcoming dances for Dutch masters. However, over time, these dances incorporated the "saweran" tradition, where money was slipped into the dancers' clothing. This practice caused female dancers to feel embarrassed and refuse to dance in front of the Dutch. Consequently, the community took the initiative to replace the female dancers with males, creating the lengger dance. "Leng" means hole, and "ger" refers to a rooster's comb (indicating a male). During the Dutch colonial era, lengger dances were used to spy on the Dutch. Over time, lengger evolved and adapted to changing times.

Lengger lanang has received both support and opposition in its development, as noted by one of our informants:

"There are both pro and contra views, yes... some people don't like it, saying 'why should a man act like a woman?' that's the contra view. But those who support it say, 'Look at that man dancing like a woman, isn't that beautiful?'" (Owner of Sanggar Sekar Endah, Mr. Aprit).

This information indicates that lengger lanang inevitably faces pro and contra views, particularly regarding moral and religious aspects. Lengger lanang is considered a form of cross-gender dance. Cross-gender refers to roles or traits contrary to the typical gender-specific characteristics in society. This term applies to dancers who, despite their male identity, occasionally appear as women in performances and vice versa (Mahfuri & Hasan Bisri, 2019). The differing perspectives of both pro and contra groups result in varying opinions on lengger

lanang. Aligning with the first informant, another informant shared a similar view. Here is another perspective from Mr. Sirwan:

"There are always pro and contra views, not just for lengger lanang but also for lengger wadon (female lengger). I once taught P5 at SMA 2 Purwokerto, and because the students were very dedicated, they wore kemben (traditional attire). However, the teachers complained about it." (Manager of Rumah Lengger, Mr. Sirwan).

He also mentioned that from a religious standpoint, lengger wadon also faces opposition from the community. People perceive lengger as an occasion for immorality. Lengger lanang faces criticism because it is believed that men should not dress as women. Mr. Sirwan added that the perspectives of art enthusiasts and non-art enthusiasts differ significantly. From an artistic viewpoint, performing lengger lanang is a means of preserving ancestral heritage. This view aligns with what Mr. Aprit, owner of Sanggar Sekar Endah, stated:

"But in my opinion, God created men and women, light and dark, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly. There is no such thing as a man or a woman... This indeed encompasses nature's law, but in Mr. Aprit's opinion, it violates it. But what can be done? This is about cultural development, albeit in that manner. That's the thought...if the community views it negatively, don't equate it with the art itself, it's just the artist's action, not the bad art..." (Owner of Sanggar Sekar Endah, Mr. Aprit).

According to Mr. Sirwan, we found that, from a functional context, lengger reduces harassment against dancers, especially if the lengger is performed only by women in revealing clothing. This is supported by research by Saputri (2020), which indicates that the historical records of

lengger lanang show that this cross-dressing tradition played a significant role and reached its heyday in Banyumas society in the past. This has encouraged Banyumas dancers to revive the lengger lanang tradition in contemporary society. Additionally, according to Noviansah et al. (2023), the emergence of lengger during the Demak kingdom era was aimed at protecting women from crimes, as Islamic teachings prohibited women from going out at night. Male dancers were not harassed by society or colonial soldiers at that time. Furthermore, according to Marsiana & Arsih (2018), lengger lanang, particularly a dancer named Agnes, was deliberately prepared for performances due to frequent invitations for various events. These performances showcased something unusual—lengger lanang, featuring male dancers, which provided a unique appeal and aimed to entertain the audience, leaving them with an unforgettable experience. However, based on opposing views from informants, there is currently a fear that lengger lanang might be used as a medium for sexual deviance. Additionally, from a visual perspective, the opposing side believes that men should not dress like women.

Another negative view of this art form is that lengger lanang might only serve as a medium. Dancers could use it for sexual deviance, such as transgender behavior and deviating from social norms. This view is supported by an informant named Dean, who mentioned:

"What is feared now is that lengger lanang might become a means of transition, like how current localizations, if moved, will certainly look for other locations. I have been a bit naughty in my dealings, and now, sorry if this is a bit sensitive, transvestites tend to be on the fringes, eventually lengger lanang might be used as a gathering place for them, that's my personal concern."

Deviations through art have indeed occurred frequently in society. The gender bias in lengger lanang makes it easier for artists to exploit it. Some communities refuse to invite lengger lanang and prefer to feature female lengger dancers instead. According to our informants, the opposition to lengger lanang stems from several factors: first, it is less visually appealing than female dancers; second, male dancers are perceived as less graceful or less skilled in performing lengger, leading people to prefer female dancers.

The background causing lengger lanang to generate pros and cons lies in the community's tendency to see only one side of it. Many people believe lengger lanang brings only negative impacts without considering its positive aspects, while others see only its positive side without acknowledging the negatives. All three informants stated that lengger lanang has its positive and negative sides.

Another cause is the deviation by dancers who use lengger lanang as a way to engage in sexual deviance, such as becoming transvestites and transgender individuals. This leads the community to blame lengger lanang rather than the perpetrators. Religious background also shapes the community's perspective, as in Islam, men are not allowed to dress like women. This prompts the community to view lengger lanang negatively.

The author observes that not all communities can evaluate the good and bad sides of lengger lanang. Many people view lengger lanang solely as negative or positive. Art and religion cannot be mixed, as they have different approaches. Proponents of lengger lanang see it as an Indigenous Indonesian art form that can bring dynamism to society, such as entertainment and its colonial function. However, the opposition is not actually against lengger lanang itself but rather fears that dancers might use lengger as a

guise for sexual deviance. The three informants agree that lengger lanang is good and must be preserved as an inherited cultural legacy. One informant also mentioned that life in society should be distinguished from when a dancer performs lengger lanang, knowing when to be a real man and a dancer dressed as a woman.

The Existence of Lengger Lanang in Contemporary Banyumas Society

The existence of lengger lanang is somewhat controversial, affecting its presence. Lengger lanang is typically performed as entertainment at various events such as district receptions in Banyumas, weddings or celebrations, and tourism events in Banyumas (Aprilia, 2021).

However, efforts to preserve lengger lanang, such as training programs, have shown a decline. In contrast, the preservation of lengger is still widely found in various art centers in Banyumas (Hartanto, 2019). Despite this, young people have received lengger lanang well, especially since the establishment of Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Negeri 3 Banyumas, commonly known as SMKI Banyumas. The existence of Rumah Lengger has provided a platform for male dancers to access and learn about lengger, highlighting the crucial role of these centers in supporting and advancing cultural arts (Satyani et al., 2024). Arts centers directly impact the conservation of cultural arts, their advancement, and the welfare of the artists involved (Lindita et al., 2021).



Figure 1. Performance of Lengger Lanang at a Special Event (Source: Instagram @rumah_lengger, 2023)

To address the controversy surrounding lengger lanang, one effective strategy is to educate young emerging dancers. When new dancers enter the field, they should be taught to distinguish between their role as a lengger lanang performer, which requires them to adopt a female persona, and their everyday life. Additionally, senior dancers and community members should support and include those more inclined towards adopting a female role. This inclusion helps prevent feelings of ostracism and fosters better social integration among dancers.

The potential benefits of this strategy include increased public awareness and sensitivity to deviation issues. This awareness can help prevent the misuse of lengger lanang as a means to facilitate sexual deviance. Furthermore, solidarity among dancers can be enhanced through social support and community integration, even if the dancers' roles deviate somewhat from traditional sexual norms.



Figure 2. Collaboration Performance by Rumah Lengger with Dewandaru Dance Company Japan (Source: Instagram @rumah_lengger, 2023)

CONCLUSION

Lengger Lanang of Banyumas is a traditional art form with significant cultural meaning and value, showcasing its unique characteristics. This dance emerged as a solution when female dancers refused to perform in front of Dutch colonizers due to the "saweran" tradition, which was deemed embarrassing.

Today, Lengger Lanang faces both support and opposition within the Banyumas community. Supporters view it as a cultural heritage that should be preserved and as a form of artistic expression. They argue that this dance has important historical and artistic value. Conversely, opponents have moral and religious concerns. They argue that men should not dress as women and worry that the dance could become a medium for sexual deviation.

This controversy impacts the existence of Lengger Lanang. While it is still performed at special events, efforts to preserve it, such as training programs, have decreased compared to preserving female-performed Lengger.

To address this controversy, several strategies are proposed. These include educating young dancers about the importance of separating their role as performers from their everyday lives and making efforts to embrace and integrate dancers who may experience gender identity changes into the community. Additionally, Wicaksono (2022) suggests introducing Lengger Lanang through audio-visual media could attract younger audiences. This may encourage youth participation in Lengger Lanang training as a form of preservation.

This study reveals that the debate surrounding Lengger Lanang reflects broader tensions between preserving cultural traditions and changing social values. It also highlights the complexity of issues related to gender and sexuality in the context of traditional art. Despite the challenges, efforts continue to preserve and adapt this dance to remain relevant in contemporary society.

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