



The Image of Woman in the *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* Arts: Gender Reality and Aesthetic Exploration

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Abstract

The image of women that is actualized through the construction of gender roles, positions, and adaptation processes in artistic expression through *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* performances is very different. In this regard, the research aims to: (1) explain the forms of art performances of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang*; and (2) explain the image of women in the art performances of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* in the context of gender reality and aesthetic exploration. The research was conducted on the art of *Sintren Ujung Gede* in Pemalang Regency and *Kuda Kepang Turonggo* in Semarang Regency. The research data were collected using the techniques of (1) observation, (2) interviews, and (3) document studies. The validity of the research data was carried out using the confirmability technique. The study used an interactive model analysis procedure, which was carried out with the stages of data collection, data reduction, data classification, and drawing conclusions. The results show that: (1) *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* arts are forms of traditional folk-art performances in which there is a scene of trance. This art is usually performed on stage or open arena by involving women as players; (2) The presence of women in the *Sintren* performances is a requirement that traditionally must be fulfilled until now. On the other hand, in the *Kuda Kepang* performances, the presence of women is a new phenomenon that provides opportunities and freedom for women to express themselves through dance. In the *Sintren* performance, the position of women becomes the center, subject, and object during the performance process. As a result, changes in the function of arts often result in the exploitation of *Sintren* dancers. On the other hand, in the *Kuda Kepang* art, the involvement of women with all their adaptations provides a new space for resistance to the existing gender stereotypes.

Keywords: woman, *sintren*, *kuda kepeng*, gender, aesthetic exploration

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INTRODUCTION

Central Java as one of the provinces in Indonesia has a variety of traditional arts, some of which still exist today. Various traditional arts exist in 29 districts consisting of Banjarnegara, Banyumas, Batang, Blora, Boyolali, Brebes, Cilacap, Demak, Grobogan, Jepara, Karanganyar, Ke-

bumen, Kendal, Klaten, Kudus, Magelang, Pati, Pekalongan, Pemalang, Purbalingga, Purworejo, Rembang, Semarang, Sragen, Sukoharjo, Tegal, Temanggung, Wonogiri, and Wonosobo.

The development of technology and industry that took place globally causes changes in various aspects of life, including in the arts. Some of the arts that were

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originally related to existing traditional rituals gradually changed their function into entertaining arts to fulfill the aesthetic needs of their supporters. In this regard, this article examines two traditional art forms that are very popular in Central Java, namely the traditional arts of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang*. The study focuses on the issue of the presence of women as players in both arts.

The performance process of the *Sintren* art, which is popular in the northern coastal areas of the island of Java, is carried out in the same way in various existing districts. *Kurungan* (a cage) as the main property is used as a closing tool for *Sintren* dancers at the beginning of the show. Furthermore, after the dancer is possessed by a spirit, through the help of a performance handler, the *Sintren* dancers are released from the cage in a state of dance attire and wearing dark glasses. In a state of *the* unconscious (trance), the *Sintren* dancers will dance on stage to the accompaniment of the music that is played (Suharti, 2013; Azzahro & Indriyanto, 2019).

The *Sintren* art, as one of the folk arts, places women as the main players who are also used as economic commodities for the benefit of groups or art associations. In the performance, the role of women in this art dominates the entire plot. The very prominent role of women is shown through the procession of *nyawer* or *saweran*, namely the activity of the audience throwing money at the dancers on stage. This tradition can certainly generate profits for art groups or art performers.

Traditionally, to become a *Sintren* dancer, ritual requirements must be met, such as (1) the selection of a female dancer who requires that she is a young or unmarried girl, and (2) female dancers must be in a state of purity or not menstruating. During the performance, the *sintren* dancer is accompanied by a handler or shaman who controls the various procedures for the performance that takes place. In addition, the performance includes offerings (in Javanese culture, they are called *sajen*) which consist of at least three types of flo-

wers, namely roses, jasmine, and Kanthil flowers, as well as various snacks, drinks such as tea, coffee, young coconut water (*degan*), fruits, and other crops that cannot be left behind. In addition to these accessories, a ritual is also carried out by burning incense to bring out a magical aroma during the performance.

The phenomenon of women as an economic commodity in the *sintren* art also occurs in the *tayub* art. *Tayub* art which is popular in Blora Regency is an entertainment dance for men who often place *tayub* dancers as 'comfort girls' (Windrati et al., 2005). *Tayub* dancer, in the eyes of the audience, is seen as a perfect woman, beautiful, good at makeup, good at dancing, and has a sweet voice. The dancers must be friendly and give their charm by giving a smile through their lips, and the dancers only surrender when they are harassed by *pengibing*.

Concerning this issue, Chiga Maro'atussofa and Eny Kusumastuti (2019) find that in the context of the *lengger* art in Wonosobo, female dancers are often abused during performances. As in the arts of *sintren* and *tayub*, in this art, there is also an act of *saweran* or *suwelan* to the dancers which is sometimes done in an impolite way.

In contrast to what happened in the *Sintren* art, in the *Kuda Kepang* art, the position of women as dancers in performances is currently a new phenomenon that shows openness and equality in artistic expression. The women in this art get the opportunity as players even though they must adapt to being male in their appearance of motion and clothing (Ismah, 2018).

The *Kuda Kepang* art is one of the most popular forms of traditional folk dance, which grows and develops in almost all areas of Central Java and even outside Central Java (Slamet, 2019; Hendriko & Efcendy, 2019; Malang & Radhia, 2017; Primastri, 2017). The dance, which was originally only danced by men with a dashing and brave appearance using a property in the form of an imitation horse as a mount made of woven bamboo, is currently in

great demand by women. Therefore, regionally this art can develop more widely in Central Java (interview, Pramono, 29 Mei 2021).

Concerning the image of women in the arts, of course, it is closely related to the various supporting institutions. From a gender perspective, the *Kuda Kepang* art as a dance that used to be performed only by male dancers is now no longer the case. There has been equality of roles between men and women (Lestari & Barus, 2020, p. 123). However, even in the broader context of dance creativity, it shows that the involvement of women in dance is still very dominant (Sugiarto, 2019).

The reality that occurs shows that art is never stagnant but always dynamically adapts to a movement of change, which has implications for the loss and emergence of new forms, including breaking away from gender boundaries. Therefore, the participation of female dancers in the *Kuda Kepang* art is a new phenomenon that allows traditional dances to live, grow and develop at any time following the development of human culture. Changes in art as a driver of life provide understanding for life by understanding the nature and role of individuals in the context of their culture (Rohidi, 2000).

This research on the image of women in *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* arts in the context of studies in gender perspective and aesthetic expression aims to: (1) explain the forms of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* arts; (2) explain the image of women in the art performances of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* in the context of gender reality and aesthetic exploration.

METHOD

A qualitative method was chosen to describe empirical phenomena arts of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* through a phenomenological approach, employing participatory observation when performances take place without adding or reducing the findings of empirical data in the field (Rohidi, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The

research was conducted on two cases of art, namely *Sintren* Art and *Kuda Kepang* Art, which were oriented to the study of gender phenomena in the arts.

The research was carried out in Ujunggede Hamlet, Pemalang Regency, and Regunung Hamlet, Semarang Regency. Pemalang Regency is one of the regencies in Central Java Province that has *Sintren* arts such as the hamlets of Padurasa, Mengori, Taman, as well as Mulyoharjo, and Ujunggede. Ujunggede Hamlet was chosen because the existing *Sintren* performances still use traditional music, while several other areas have combined the accompaniment of *Sintren* music with the addition of Dangdut music. The *Kuda Kepang Turonggo Seto* group in Regunung Hamlet was chosen because this traditional art is one of the art groups whose players are women.

The main subjects of the study were the *Sintren* dancers of Mulyorejo, Ujunggede, Pemalang Regency, Central Java and the *Kuda Kepang* dancers in the *Turonggo Seto* art group, Karang Gondang Hamlet, Regunung Village, Tengar District, Semarang Regency, Central Java. The researchers also chose another source person as supporting data, namely the leaders of these traditional arts groups.

The research data were collected using the following techniques: (1) observation, (2) interviews, and (3) document studies. Participation observations were carried out during the research process with the help of audio and video recording equipment. Interviews were conducted with dancers, musicians, group leaders, and observers of performing arts. Document studies were conducted on field notes, artworks of *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang*, in the form of audiovisuals and photos. The validity of the data uses the triangulation of data, sources, and theory was carried out. The data analysis was carried out using an interactive model with the following stages: (1) data collection, (2) data reduction, (3) data classification, and (4) drawing conclusions (Milles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sintren and Kuda Kepang Art Performances

Sintren and *Kuda Kepang* art performances, as well as several other traditional arts in rural communities in Central Java, are usually performed at ritual ceremonies, celebrations such as *sunatan*, weddings (*mantenan*), *merti desa*, or village clean, and the commemoration of national holidays (Ghofur & Rini, 2015; Hardwick, 2017). In this context, there are two main functions of this art: traditional ritual ceremonies, social facilities, and entertainment. However, the function for ceremonial purposes has begun to be abandoned. The function of a ceremony is only carried out by people in certain areas whose traditions are still strong. On the other hand, the function of dance as entertainment in this art is currently increasing (Romadi, 2019).

Sintren is a traditional art that places women as dancers and main players. The performance is held on an open stage supported by a group of accompaniment music players. Apart from dancers and musical accompaniment players, *Sintren* is also supported by a handler who is spiritually in charge of controlling the dancers.

Kurungan (a cage) is an important property in the performance, which is used as a place when the dancer is in a state of unconsciousness (trance). Changing clothes is a half-round woven bamboo with a cloth covering. *Kurungan* in everyday life in Javanese society is usually used as a place to confine animals such as chickens, ducks, or geese.

In the *Sintren* performance, there is an interaction between the dancer and the audience. When the audience throws money at the *Sintren* dancers, the interaction is carried out. The audience performs this ritual with the hope that the *Sintren* dancer will change the form or be aware of the trance. This interaction is the characteristic that distinguishes *Sintren* art from other traditional arts in Central Java.

The *Sintren* dancers in dance costumes equipped with sunglasses accessories

become the subject and the dominant object and become the central character during the performance. There are several requirements and demands that a *Sintren* dancer must-have, which makes not all women able to become *Sintren* dancers. The special criteria as the main requirements such as dancers are women who are still young and pure, meaning that they have never had sex with men and are not menstruating while playing *Sintren*. The central position of *sintren* dancers in the performance can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Performances and costume of the main dancer in *Sintren* art performance (Documentation by Ika, Lestari, 2021)



Figure 2. The trance scene in *Sintren* performance (Documentation by Dika, Lestari 2021)

In contrast to the *Sintren* art, the *Kuda Kepang* art performance was initially performed by male dancers. Male players with dance costumes and property support in the form of imitation horses made of woven bamboo (*kebang*) better reflect the masculine dance performance or *gagahan*. In the performance, this art is usually performed on an open stage with the support of a group of accompaniment mu-

sic players who are on stage. This format of performance is done so that the music playing and the *Kuda Kepang* dancers can be seen clearly by the audience. Almost as happened in the *Sintren* performance, there is also trance at certain times in the *Kuda Kepang* performance.

Although originally this art was only played by men, at this time, there have been emerging *Kuda Kepang* art groups whose dancers are women. One of them is the Turonggo Seto art group which is the subject of the research. Although Karang Gondang Hamlet, Regunung Village, Tengaran District, Semarang Regency, Central Java also has a *Kuda Kepang* art group whose dancers are all male. This condition is relevant to Vinlandari and dan Gunawan (2020) opinion, which states that dance is an activity that can be carried out by both men and women, even though the issue of gender construction is still a benchmark in determining dance style or character. Figure 3 and Figure 4 describe the *Kuda Kepang* performance played by female dancers and the setting of the performance.



Figure 3. Front view of one of the formations at the beginning of the *Kuda Kepang* performance and its setting stage (Documentation by Lestari, 29 Mei 2021)



Figure 4. One of the formation and movements of the *Kuda Kepang* dance with imitation horse property made of woven bamboo (Documentation by Lestari, 2021)

The Image of Women in the *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* Art Performances: Gender Reality and Aesthetic Expression

The image of women that refers to the construction of women's roles in *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* Arts in the context of gender has differences. Realities that are socially constructed and defined culturally are closely related to the development of stereotypes which are ideas or images that have been predetermined for generations in various fields of activity, including gender (Hussain et al., 2015). In the context of *Sintren* art as one of the traditional arts, it is shown that, although the function aspect of this art has changed, the presence of female dancers has never been replaced. Some of the requirements attached to dancers from generation to generation are maintained. Even currently, the existing *Sintren* arts are almost entirely adapting and developing the performance format for entertainment purposes (Nurlelasari et al., 2017).

At this time to become a *Sintren* dancer is not easy. Several requirements must be met, such as (1) a woman who is still a virgin, (2) being willing to fast before performing, and (3) when fasting; dancers must maintain their diet and avoid actions that can destroy their sanctity. This is done with the belief that the spirit will not experience difficulties when it enters the body of the *Sintren* dancer at the time of the performance.

In the *Sintren* art, the position of women as the central character during the performance is more of an entertaining object. All rhythmic dance moves that start from the moment you get out of the cage until the end of the performance are unconscious expressions (trance). The dancers are under the control of a "handler" and the musical accompaniment is stimulated to swing and dance to fulfill the demands and desires of the audience.

In the economic context, *Sintren* dancers' attractiveness and their popularity become a commodity for the art groups they participate in. Apart from getting paid from the *penanggap*, this art group benefits

from sawer or money from the audience directed at the *Sintren* dancers in each of their performances. In a situation like this, the position of the *Sintren* dancer becomes vulnerable to harassment by men and even exploited because when dancing, they do not realize what they are doing.

In dance or other physical activity, women and men are often considered different because of innate differences in body structure (Oliver & Risner, 2017). However, in reality, what happened to the *Sintren* art was different from what happened to the *Kuda Kepang* art. The *Kuda Kepang* art, a dance that men usually play, is now commonly played by female dancers. The *Turonggo Seto Kuda Kepang* group consisting of young women is one example of the existing groups of *Kuda Kepang*. The presence of women as dancers in the performances in this group is a different proof that not all dances reflect the gender identity of the dancers (Bassetti, 2013) the article focuses on the "problem of the male dancer". Once discussed the historical genealogy of the stigma and its effect on men's participation in dance, I consider three stigma "antidotes". Two of them - artistic- professional excellence, manifest in structural inequalities, professional practice and social discourse ; and athleticism, involving discursive and representational strategies - consist of emphasising the masculinising aspects of dancing-as-art/profession (virtuosity, creativity).

In the *Kuda Kepang* art, the trance attraction is also the part that the audience has been waiting for. Nevertheless, the aspect of dance as a medium of aesthetic expression for the dancers and their audiences is currently a major concern for the choreographers and the audience. Based on these characteristics, *Kuda Kepang* art from the aspect of number and distribution can develop more widely when compared to *Sintren* art, which can only survive and thrive on the northern coast of Java, especially Central Java.

The emergence of *Kuda Kepang* art groups consisting of female dancers is proof that this art is more adaptable to

changes in the construction of the roles of men and women in artistic practice. The *Turonggo Seto Kuda Kepang* group, which consists of female dancers, does not show a trance scene, unlike other art groups that usually consist of male dancers.

In the performance, female dancers of the *Kuda Kepang Turonggo Seto* group try to adapt to play a *gagahan* dance that men usually play. By riding the *Kuda Kepang* property, Dancers explore aesthetics supported by costumes, make-up, variety of movements, floor patterns, and expressions in rhythm with the accompaniment music and the existing characterizations. This context proves that there has been a cross-playing activity as a form of resistance to gender stereotypes by employing male character dances played by women (Mahfuri & Bisri, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* performances are traditional arts that still exist in the society of Central Java. As time advances, it has triggered a change in the form of the show. The art that is usually performed on the open stage at rituals, celebrations, and other performance events, from the aspect of the involvement of female players, there are differences. In the *Sintren* art, the presence of women as central figures during performances for ritual purposes is a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation until now. On the other hand, in the *Kuda Kepang* art, the presence of women is a new phenomenon that is starting to develop in various areas in Central Java.

When the *Sintren* and *Kuda Kepang* arts changed their function into entertainment arts, the female dancer during the performance had a position as both a subject and an object that was vulnerable to exploitation to meet the economic needs and demands of the audience. On the other hand, in the *Kuda Kepang* art, the existing entertainment events can provide space for women to show their ability to explore dance even though they must make

various adaptations. Adaptation done is the form of resistance to gender stereotypes, such as performing a range of *gagahan* motions for men, wearing a costume and makeup like a man, and expressions in rhythm with the existing dynamic music. (Hardwick, n.d.)

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