



Brebes Buroq: The Art Expression of Coastal Javanese Muslim Society

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Abstract

The art of *Buroq* is a procession of puppet which has beautiful female face with winged-horse body and dance to the music of *Genjring* and tambourine. This traditional art is one of the dominant arts that becomes one cultural identity of the people in Brebes District, located in the west of the northern coast of Java island, Central Java Province. This study aims to study the aesthetic form, function and symbolic values of *Buroq*, as well as the system of relationship patterns among actors, *Buroq* puppets, and the audience. The result of the research shows that the rise of *Buroq* art stems from the *Isra'-Mi'raj* 'trip of Prophet Muhammad by using the vehicle named *Buroq*. It is narrated that *Buroq* is like a winged-horse with a beautiful woman face who can move with lightning speed as a vehicle in the *Isra'-Mi'raj* journey of the Prophet Muhammad. This story is the primary source of inspiration for local artists to express aesthetic-symbolic in accordance with the imagination they possess in the form of acculturation that combines elements of Javanese, Chinese, and Islamic cultural symbols. As Islamic-based traditional arts of community, *Buroq* with all the uniqueness of its physical form not only has functions and values in the grandeur of Islam which awakens and strengthens the cultural awareness among residents to act and behave in accordance with the teaching of Islam in coastal Javanese Islamic culture but also has the functionality and entertainment value for the multicultural community.

Keywords: *Buroq; Islam; expression; traditional art; coastal Islamic Javanese community*

INTRODUCTION

One of the unique traditional arts of Java coastal area is *Buroq* in Brebes. *Buroq* is a procession in the form of a large puppet which has a beautiful female face with winged horse body and dances beautifully under *genjring* and tambourine musical sounds. Behind it, there are a number of dancers carrying a big lion puppet ridden by a child. The main puppet is moved by two people. The accompanying group consists of at least nine people. They include *genjring* and tambourine players, drum players, flutist, guitar players and singer. This study explores this traditional art of Java coastal area to illuminate how forms of folk arts are used to symbolize religious values. There has been many studies on Islam in Java (Ricklefs 2012; Dho-

fier 2014; Woodward 2010; Adamson 2007; Möller 2005; Rudnyckij 2009; Hasan 2009), but none of this discuss the Islamic arts in Java. This article is important in the way it discusses Islamic practices in Java through arts.

The shape of *Buroq* has something in common with the Islamic story of flying horse. The creature is based on the life story of the Prophet Muhammad who did the Ascension journey from the Grand Mosque to the Aqsa Mosque by riding an animal which is told to have a form of a winged horse. *Buroq* performance is usually shown in some ceremonies, such as circumcision, marriage, *syukuran*, and so forth. Usually, it is done since early in the morning around the village where they celebrate the occasion and

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is accompanied by music of Shalawatan (Islamic musical praise) and Brebesan *parikan* (traditional poems).

However, amidst the modern entertainment, *Buroq* art performance is increasingly marginalized. Several dozens of arts groups are not able to grow or even survive (Setiawan 2011). There has been a dilemmatic situation. On the one hand, the art is a populist expression of high value of coastal locality, but on the other, the appreciation from people is declining (Dahana 2012). One of assumptions on the cause of such problem is less consciousness of the locality values. Therefore, conserving this traditional art is absolutely necessary when different cultures from around the world continue to show attitudes that are often manifested in the shifting values of locality (Sujatmoko 1990; Ricklefs 2012). Conservation means to maintain the true identity so that the cultural base remains strong. One of the efforts of the conservation is by doing the assessment and documentation of the traditional arts.

In addition, a traditional art that lives in multicultural Islamic society of Brebes certainly is an interesting phenomenon. Islam purists usually promote the values that prefer Islam to be applied and consistently try to remove the values related to magic (Chamin 2003). However, *Buroq* art, in the process of its emergence, has been transformed into a folk art which becomes a cultural expression and property of the whole society in Brebes. Surely, more community supporters have varying cultural values despite their Islamic values remains as the most dominant value. It is supported by Rohidi (2000, p.229), explaining that the coastal art can be establish due to combination of Islamic and Javanese arts traditions. Therefore, the characteristic form of expression of Islam that prioritizes egalitarian values in Java coastal area is very interesting to be investigated based on its forms and symbolization.

Based on these realities, this paper aims to examine the issue of *Buroq* as an expression of folk art within symbolization review of elements as the representation of Islamic values based on multiculturalism in Brebes. One interesting side and innovation

of this research is that the *Buroq* art performance is not studied merely on its autonomous shape beauty (formalistic) but also the understanding of the code and symbolic meanings by putting *Buroq* artwork as part of systematic social values of multiculturalism culture adopted by the performers, community as appreciators, and government which has the policy on the development of a culture in the area.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach. The goal of research was the embodiment of form, Islamic values and system of patterns of interaction between creators, artwork, and spectator of *Buroq* in actualizing Islamic values based on multiculturalism life in Brebes. The research location was in Brebes, especially the surviving art groups of *Buroq*. Data collection techniques used in this study were the observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The use of these techniques were flexible according to the conditions in the field with the main instrument of collecting data was human instrument, i.e. the research team and a team of helpers. In general, the data was collected and analyzed using qualitative analysis approach. The analysis procedures were pursued through the reduction process, presentation, and verification of data with interactive cycle analysis model (Miles and Huberman 1992).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brebes is one of regencies in Central Java province which is directly adjacent to the area of West Java Province and is located on the north coast of Java Sea. Brebes grows and develops in accordance with the characteristics of an Islamic cultural in a coastal region. As a district that is wide enough, most of its territory is lowland.

Brebes community, in communicating, generally uses Javanese language dialect. However, some people use Sundanese dialect too, especially people who are in the adjacent area to the city of Cirebon, West Java. In Javanese culture, Brebes is within the coverage of coastal culture of *Kulon*

(Western) region including Cirebon, Brebes, Tegal and Pekalongan with common characteristics of Muslims (Koentjaraningrat 1984, p.26). As an area that is covered within the scope of *kulon* coastal culture, their cultural patterns are embodied within their belief systems for example in holding several indigenous rituals, such as *sedekah bumi*, *sedekah laut*, *khaul*, and artwork shows which use typical nuances of Islamic and the elements of local area.

The Myth of Buroq and The Beginning of its Physical Appearance

From the various sources of oral tradition, *Buroq* is the vehicle of the Prophet Muhammad in the Isra 'Mi'raj that is portrayed as a winged-horse with a beautiful woman head. It has the ability to fly very fast as fast as lightning. This is consistent with the origin of the Arabic word *Buroq*: *barqun* which means lightning. Isra 'Mi'raj is the journey of Prophet Muhammad SAW from the Holy Mosque to the Aqsa Mosque toward *Sidratul Muntaha*. The *Buroq* artwork is located in Brebes. According to the narrative of its physical appearance, it emerged the first time approximately in 1934 by a resident named Ta'al from the village of Babakan Kalimaro, Cirebon Regency. The art of making puppet was originally intended as a means of religious symbols of Islam, and it was gradually spread to other regions around Cirebon, like Losari, Brebes, Banjarharjo, Kuningan, and Indramayu.

In its development, *Buroq* artwork is also feature as an art performance which is shown for entertainment through pageantry or procession, especially in the circumcision paraded ceremony. There are also parents who ask *Buroq* performance as part of their *nadzar* or vow payment, for example because their children are recovering from an illness, or when their kids have circumcision. In addition, such art performance develops or evolves into more current entertainment by involving diverse puppet figures, musical instruments "*Tarling*" which means guitar and flute, lyrics, dance, comedy or *bodor*, and dangdut songs, as well as magic.

The Shape of Buroq and its Spectators

Buroq is a large puppet in the form of a four-legged animal with a body of a winged-horse and beautiful female face. *Buroq* facial expression is smiling, white, red lips, and slanted-eyed with eyelashes and crowned. *Buroq* body has the same length with its wings. The body is draped in yellow and pink. It has four legs which are represented by two men's feet serving as the *Buroq* dancing part. In order to make the *Buroq's* leg and men's leg as one aesthetic entity, the costumes worn by the two men are colored the same as the body of *Buroq*.

The dancing movement before it is ridden by children typically uses free-motion movement, i.e. turning-head, careful jumping, etc. When ridden by children, player movement is only an extension of the foot to the front, rear and side. In addition to the main form of *Buroq* puppet, there are also some supporting puppets such as tigers, horses, elephants, lions, and eagle puppets which are commonly referred as *Badawang*. Unlike the *Buroq* which is only ridden by two people, the other puppets which will be played by four people are ridden by two to six children. In addition, there are also *barongan* and Lion Dance. As a complement, the opposition character of *Barongan* is *Cepot* or *Penthul* with its witty character.

From the developments over the years, *Buroq* which plays a major puppet in the performance has more traditional style with the existing standard. These aspects are considered as a symbol of animal of *Buroq* which was ridden by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. This is different from supporting puppets that always look more dynamic and flexible or are modified to be more modern or contemporary. Therefore, *Badawang* characters are puppets like spongeboob, *ondel-ondel*, *marsha*, and *superhero* emerge. Its presence serves as an entertainment and no longer implies any divinity rules about fasting month wisdom or virtue but rather to secular values that seem more funny and interesting.

Here is the visual analysis of the beautiful *Buroq* in order to obtain the value of formalistic, expressionistic, symbolic, and

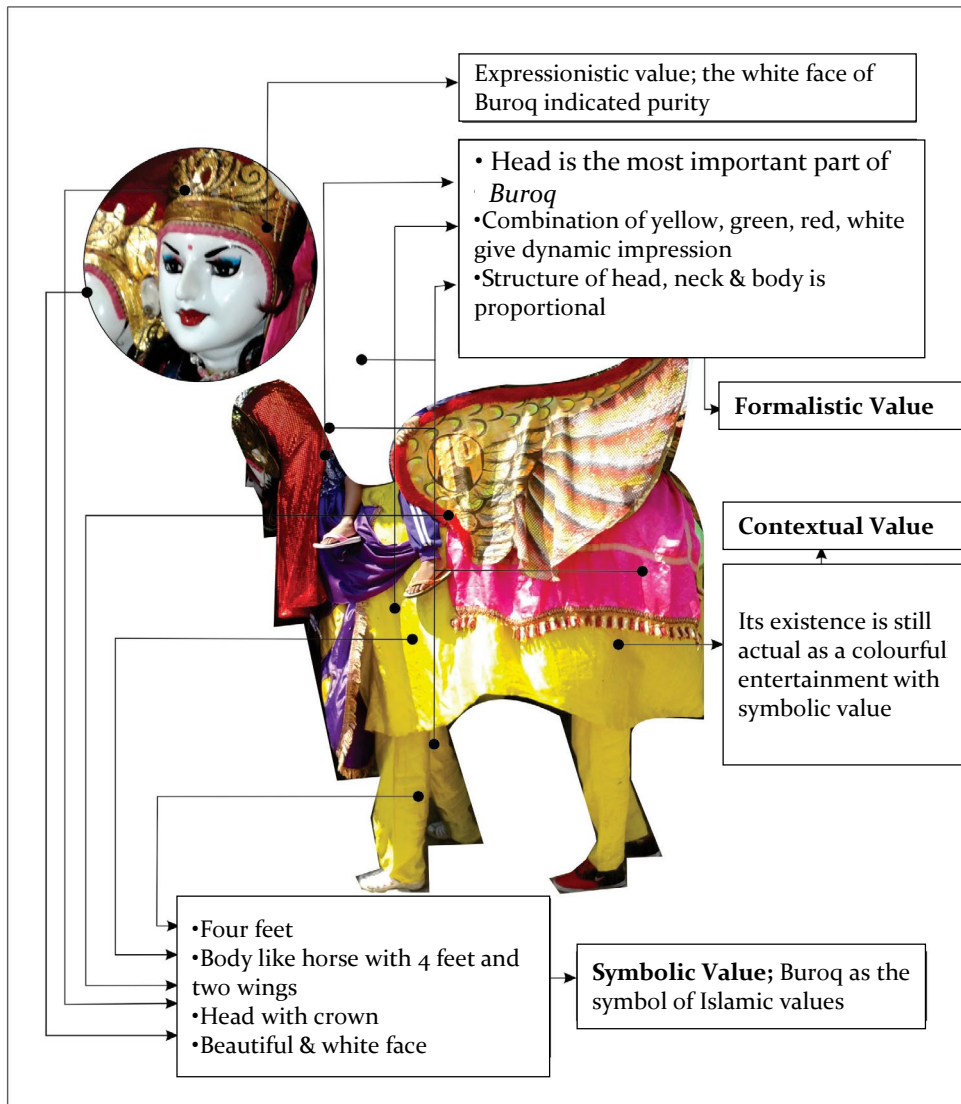


Figure 1: aesthetic values in *Buroq* appearance

contextual beauties.

Formalistic aesthetic value of *Buroq* is virtualized within a combination of lines, shapes, colors, and textures with a specific composition so that it creates impression of balance, harmony, rhythm, focus and unity. From the expression aspect, its beautiful face and the clothing hanging down with bright colors confirm *Buroq's* characters which are calm and soft. Contextually, the presence of *Buroq* which is always awaited by the audience is a proof that it is an exciting entertainment. The winged, beautiful, and colorfully dressed figure of *Buroq* symbolically represents that Islamic faith is an animal that was brought to the Prophet Muhammad SAW as well as reflecting the culture of multicultural harmonization of

Islamic, Javanese and Chinese culture.

In the past, the process of *Buroq's* face making was done by using sticky seeds which were crushed and melted to be mushy pulp and then molded to a molding of clay. After the mask dried, *Buroq's* face was created. But the product of this process is fragile and cannot be used repeatedly. Therefore, in order not to constantly make new ones, wood is then used as the main material. The process is made by carving it in a shape of beautiful face, sand it then caulk and paint it. The anatomical structures of the body and neck are made of wood and bamboo. And the cover for the body, neck, head, and feet is made from materials such as paper, Styrofoam, foam, and paint.

Islamic Values Represented in *Buroq* Artwork

Since the beginning of its creation, *Buroq* has been used as a medium to spread the Islamic religion. Although Islamic value is continuously eroded by time, if we look closely, *Buroq* performance remains showing Islamic values. The emergence of new forms of *Buroq* puppet comes from the story in Islam of Isra 'Mi'raj Prophet, implying the miracle of Allah SWT. In the current era, *Buroq* is also often performed in front of people who hold a celebration of their son's circumcision. In the event, the kids being circumcised are paraded by riding *Buroq*. In these aspects, the circumcised boy is an activity that follows the teachings of Islam.

In addition, there is also an artistic tradition of *Buroq* called "*Ombrog*" which is used to wake the citizens when the dawn breaks using Islamic songs. When the day of Eid is approaching, all the villagers contribute in the form of money or rice to *ombrog* group who travel in the area. The donation is partly used for group contribution cash and the other part is used for social activities such as building rural environment, buying equipment or infrastructure for funeral, establishing worship places, and also helping people who are in need in the area of the village. Through the above-mentioned activities, there are shared values or mutual cooperation carried out by ordinary villagers as a value that is emphasized by Islam.

This *Buroq* performance can be used as a platform to give prosperity for the family members and players. The income earned is the creativity of creating *Buroq* puppet and rent-service, even to accommodate people who want to buy it. The owner of *Buroq* typically instills the values of honesty and kindness on his players by showing the discipline in training and performances.

Although there is a tendency to the depletion or even far from Islamic teaching in *Buroq* such as the music and dance which are more dynamic and popular, there are also some values of Islamic education that are still delivered. Most of *Buroq* players, they will usually play music *Genjring* in form of musical instruments such as *ter-*

bbang, *kricik* and it is usually accompanied by Islamic songs like *berjanji*, *asrokolan*, and *qasidahan*. In the middle of the music, there will be some advice on the importance of matchmaking, truth, honesty, and fairness that contain Islamic values as the main topics. The *parikan* (poem) in Brebes style is usually sung by a group of comedians or "*bodor*". The example of *parikan* containing Islamic values, among others; 1) *Buntut curut buntute jaran, kolang-kaling sabrang kana, kudu nurut prentahe Pangeran, mumpung urip ning alam dunya*, 2) *Amben-amben kayune nangka, diganti kayune blimbing, emben-emben ngenteni apa, mumpung saiki lagi kesanding*, 3) *Esuk-esuk mangan timun, timun akeh getahe, esuk-esuk aja nglamun, nglamun akeh susahe*

The Relationship Pattern between Performers, Artwork, and Art Lovers of *Buroq* which is Based on Multiculturalism

Buroq performance in Brebes is a cultural phenomenon that unites several interacting, interdependence and interrelation, integral, and rounded elements instilled in community life. The aesthetic expression has proven that art is not merely a requirement but it has become the needs of community to have a way of life which also becomes symbolic systems.

This way of life can be observed through the symbolic aspect of *Buroq* which is filled with teachings or multiculturalism values. The values of multiculturalism is not merely reflected visually in the form of a puppet figure of *Buroq* which contains elements of Arabic (Islam), Javanese, and Chinese cultures, but it also appears in the aspect of ideas, messages, and format of presentation. It shows that empirically, *Buroq* really comes from Islam culture. At least, the term "*Buroq*" which is used as a name of art in Brebes is the symbolic incarnation of the vehicle of Isra'-Mi'raj used by Prophet Muhammad SAW. *Buroq* is as a system which can also be characterized by various aspects, such as, purpose, instrumentation and property, implementation/performance, educational, shape and structure.

Buroq as part of cultural system is not necessarily seen in isolation as an explicit product of systemic ideas in Brebes subculture (coast of Java), but it is also connected well with other systems. In various historical records, the development of art and religion (belief) looks very dominant as the two things are intertwined, especially when we refer to the development of art and religion in Brebes culture and subculture. It will either directly or indirectly set the pattern for the paradigmatic community of Brebes. Finally, instrumentalistically, *Buroq* is considered the most effective media to disseminate Islamic teachings or values which gradually enters into a way of life (knowledge, beliefs, and values) in the community. This appears in the arts subculture *Buroq* in the north coast of Java, known as the base region for the spread of Islam in Java, including in Brebes.

Buroq essentially consists of three components, namely, *Buroq* artwork, performer, and community as supporters. First, *Buroq* is a system of idea which today still has commercial, recreational, multidimensional and multicultural properties. This strong notion is very supported by Brebes Regency which is a growing area of acculturation and internalization of Islamic values with the ecological value of coastal areas north of Java (*lor-kulon*). *Buroq* serves as an artistic expression and at the same time, contains Hadith, sayings and teachings of life using popular language of local community. It is clear that in terms of the substance of the message, *Buroq* actually has a mission of propaganda. The musical accompaniment is mixed between traditional Islam and modern musical instruments which shows the adaptation of pop culture to the public.

Second, the performers with their creativity are able to respond the changing demands in the community. This creativity is what makes the artists can maintain its existence in the midst of society or not (see: Wolff, 1989. Mr. Casudin as the *Buroq* performer in *Ketanggungan* District is one of the artists *Buroq* who shows the existence until today. His creativity in adding sub-

jects and property to support children segmentation (such as a cartoon, dolls, head barong, etc.) and adult segmentation (such as *dangdut* of modern music, *bencong* figure, handsome singer, and so on) created an art group which is mostly demanded by the local community. However, *Buroq* remains holding the rules which are symbolically controlled by the values of culture (Geertz 1973). *Buroq* performers are well aware that *Buroq* is a folk art and their segmentation is for common people.

Third, the public audience as supporters can actually be said as the most determining factor in aesthetic transformation of Brebes *Buroq*. When it is analyzed according to the system in the arts, *Buroq* cannot refrain from the adjustment based on public demand / taste. This has led to the development of *Buroq* in Brebes which has three development orientations. Three orientations are the preservation, development to economic interests or the interests of the commercialization of popular art and personal expression of interest (Bourdieu 1986). Currently, the second orientation becomes more dominant than the other two orientations.

Based on the above analysis of the system of art (art trilogy), it can be affirmed in theory that *Buroq* is an artwork from Brebes which contains Islamic values and has been settled down as the value system of a particular pattern in the community with a variety of development. The development pattern can be mapped in three following empirical findings. First, *Buroq* as art tradition which has been going on for generations (Sedyawati 1991) is an art form containing multidimensional aspect which is described visually through symbols, accompaniment, and rhythmic movements in the form and structure. Second, *Buroq* is a form of "adaptation-aesthetic" to the communities in Brebes in an effort to respond the needs of integrative (aesthetic) on the one hand and Islam on the other. The presence of aesthetic adaptation shows that *Buroq* has undergone symbolic transformation. Therefore, it becomes beautiful both explicitly (intra-aesthetically) or implicitly

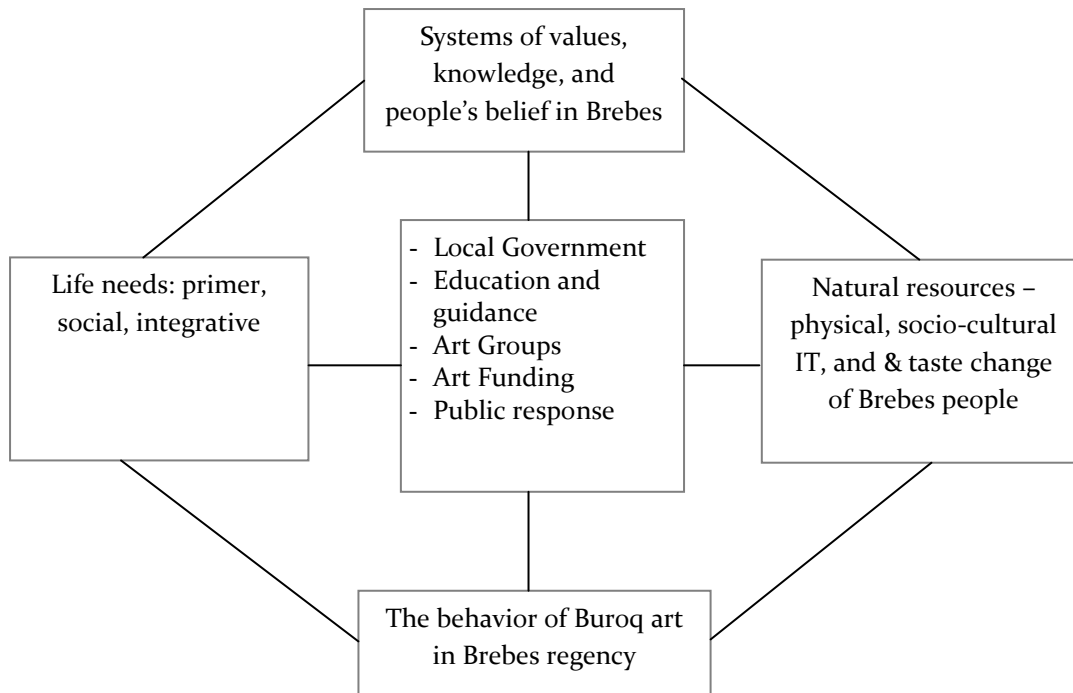


Figure 2. Chart of *Buroq* position in cultural perspective

(extra- aesthetically). Third, the transformation of aesthetic form of *Buroq* in Brebes remains relevant even when it is implicative to the needs and development of public taste. The transformation marks the creativity of artists in response to the segment ‘market’ on one hand, but reduce the ideational values on the other side so that it becomes a sensational cultural product (Smiers 2009).

In relation to the position of art as symbolic system in the context of a dynamic culture, *Buroq* is closely related to culture of Brebes society in general. Systemically, the position of art in cultural perspective of *Buroq* is addressed in the Figure 2.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion of the results, several conclusions can be stated as follows: First, *Buroq* is the procession of *Buroq* puppet with some supporting puppets accompanied by musical instruments. *Buroq* has a beautiful face of a woman; the body resembles a four-legged horse with wings. *Buroq* performance remains using traditional style from year to year and the supporting puppets like *bedawang*, lion dance, and *penthul* or *Cepot* use modern or contemporary style. Visually,

Buroq has formalistic beauty, expressionistic, contextual, and symbolic values.

Second, *Buroq* represents Islamic values, especially life advice to people in Brebes to always have good deeds, honesty, fairness, mutual assistance, and practice the teachings of Islam in accordance with the socio-cultural context of the local community. Third, *Buroq* is a medium to deliver symbolic message of ethics. *Buroq* in idea system is an art community of Brebes that currently has commercial, recreational, multidimensional and multicultural properties. Performers with their creativity are able to respond to the changing demands in the community. Community demand can be said as the most determining factor for the aesthetic transformation in Brebes *Buroq*. As an art performance containing multiculturalism, *Buroq* constantly evolves in the middle of the cultural dynamics that can be marked on its purpose, instrumentation and properties, performance, education, form and structure aspects. *Buroq* development pattern takes place over generations as a multidimensional artwork by always trying to do the aesthetic-adaptation that remains relevant even when it is implicative to the

needs and development of public taste.

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