

Memory and Performance in the Among Tebal Tobacco Ritual of Islam Aboge Farmers in Temanggung, Central Java

Susi Ivvaty ^{a,1,*}

^a Master's Programme in Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Kampus UI Depok, Depok, West Java, 16424, Indonesia

¹ susi.ivvaty@ui.ac.id*

ORCID: ¹ 0000-0000-0000-0000

* Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Tobacco farmers in Temanggung Regency, Central Java, open every planting season with a rite called among tebal, in which the first seedlings are set into the ground on a day fixed by the farmer's own birth date in the Javanese calendar. Most of these farmers follow Islam Aboge, a strand of Javanese Islam that reckons ritual time through an eight-year calendrical cycle. Existing scholarship on Temanggung has read the ritual life of tobacco farmers chiefly as political resistance, or has approached this particular rite at one remove through its representation in fiction, leaving the practice itself unexamined. This article asks how farmers' memory sustains the rite across generations, and how a private observance has developed into a communal ritual performance staged before an audience. The study combines ethnography with performance studies, drawing on life-history interviews and participant observation across the 2017 and 2018 planting seasons in three villages of Temanggung, with farmers of three generations, ritual elders, women who assemble the offerings, and agricultural officials. It finds that ritual knowledge travels by repeated reproduction rather than serial retelling, which holds the outward form of the rite remarkably stable while its interpretive layer varies from farmer to farmer; and that communal staging does not displace the individual rite but adds a public register in which farmers assert an identity as tobacco growers who decline to become coffee growers. The article contributes an account of ritual persistence understood as memory work rather than as resistance.	cultural identity oral tradition sesaji slametan Weton  This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

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INTRODUCTION

Between February and early May each year, on a day fixed by his or her own birth date and Javanese market-day (*weton*), a tobacco farmer on the upper slopes of Gunung Sumbing or Gunung Sindoro carries a woven bamboo tray (*tampah*) of offerings up to a field that has lain fallow since the last harvest. The farmer sits cross-legged before the tray, prays silently, lights incense (*kemenyan*), then rises and scatters turmeric-tinted rice to the west, east, north and south, and finally upward. Holes are bored into the soil with a dibbling stick, and a small number of tobacco seedlings — the number itself derived from the farmer's birth-date reckoning — is set into the ground. The rite lasts perhaps twenty minutes. It is called *among tebal*, from *momong*, “to tend” or “to care for”, and it is also known as *ngelekasi*, “the beginning”.

Temanggung Regency lies at the centre of Central Java, a broad upland depression ringed by volcanic slopes at elevations between roughly 500 and 1,450 metres. Its dry-field agriculture is dominated by tobacco to a degree unusual even in Java: of some 120,000 registered farmers recorded in the 2018 farmer-registration (*kartu tani*) data, approximately 35,000 grew tobacco and nothing else, on an average holding of about half a hectare across roughly 19,000 hectares (APTI Kabupaten Temanggung, 2018). More recent regency statistics confirm that tobacco has retained this dominance over the dry-field sector in the years since, notwithstanding sustained official efforts to diversify upland cultivation (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Temanggung [BPS Temanggung], 2023). What farmers hope for above all is *srinthil*, a premium grade of leaf of extraordinary aroma and price that has never been cultivated successfully by design; it appears, unbidden, in some seasons and not others, and its origin is explained through orally transmitted lore concerning Ki Ageng Makukuhan, a disciple of Sunan Kudus said to have brought tobacco seed to Temanggung while spreading Islam through agriculture (Laily, 2016, p. 34).

Among tebal is one rite in a longer sequence that runs the length of the cultivation cycle, from *nyecel*, the preparation of the fallow field, through the successive leaf-pickings, to *tungguk*, the thanksgiving held once most of the crop is in. By the most conservative reckoning, which takes the documented beginnings of *kretek* clove-cigarette manufacture in Java as its marker, the sequence has been performed for more than 130 years (Hanusz, 2011); it may well be considerably older if tied instead to tobacco's introduction to the archipelago in the early seventeenth century. Nearly all of the farmers who perform it adhere to Islam Aboge, a strand of Javanese Islam named from *Alip Rebo Wage*, the rule that in the year Alip the first of Sura falls on Wednesday Wage (Masri'ah, 2009, p. 17), and whose adherents reckon ritual time by an eight-year cycle distinct from both the Hijri and the Gregorian calendar.

The persistence of this rite is not self-evident. Farmers perform it against recurring anxiety over excise policy and a trading structure in which price is effectively set by manufacturers; against a growing current of Islamic opinion that regards indigenous ceremonial practice as *shirk*, or as outright deviance; and against a well-funded regional programme promoting arabica and robusta coffee on the same slopes. Commitment to the ritual is, if anything, most visible precisely where it is staged most elaborately, accompanied by *wayang* shadow theatre, *jathilan* trance dance and costumed procession. That conjunction — intensifying ritual under intensifying pressure — is what this article sets out to explain.

Four bodies of scholarship bear on the problem, and each stops short of it in a different way. The first reads Javanese agrarian ceremony as an instance of *slametan*, the communal meal through which occasions are marked, redeemed or made safe, and reads *slametan* in turn as a syncretic settlement in which Indic, Islamic and indigenous elements each find a place (Geertz, 2000, 2017; Koentjaraningrat, 1990). Work in this line, extended by comparative theorists of ritual as symbolic action oriented to the sacred (Bell, 2009; Goody, 2010), has established the general grammar of the form with great precision. It treats particular agrarian rites, however,

as instances of a type rather than as objects with a transmission history of their own, and therefore has little to say about why one rite persists where a neighbouring one lapses.

The second body of work addresses Temanggung tobacco directly, but through the register of political economy. Sobary (2014, 2016), drawing on fieldwork conducted across the first half of the 2010s and culminating in the 2015 founding of the Laskar Kretek movement, reads a mass kretek-smoking gathering of ten thousand farmers as an act of resistance, and elsewhere reads farmers' offerings and incantations as a "poetic weapon" wielded from the bottom of the value chain; Margana et al. (2014) situate kretek within a longer national-heritage narrative. This literature established a register in which farmers' practices are legible as political claims. Its evidential base, however, is an activist minority: farmers in the villages studied here, asked in March 2017, were unaware of the gathering or of Laskar Kretek at all, which suggests that a reading built on that constituency cannot be generalised to Temanggung's tobacco farmers as a whole.

The third body of work is the single prior study of among tebal itself. Alfayanti et al. (2017) analyse the symbolic meaning of the ritual's offerings as these are represented in Sundari Mardjuki's novel *Genduk*, concluding that the offerings figure human life and petition God for a good harvest. The reading is careful and its conclusions are broadly consonant with what is found in the field. It is, however, a study of a literary representation rather than of a practice: it can say what the offerings mean in a novel, but not who taught them to whom, nor how the meaning survived the handover.

The fourth body of work supplies the apparatus this article uses, applied to other Indonesian material. Studies in oral tradition have established that a tradition qualifies as such once it has lived across at least two generations and travels through unwritten discourse (Pudentia, 1998, 2015), that performance is by nature singular and that innovation is intrinsic rather than corrosive to continuity (Murgiyanto, 2004, 2015), and that the transmission and sustainability of a ritual repertoire can be analysed as an empirical question about bearers and occasions rather than as an assertion about cultural resilience (Irawati & Dandes, 2023; Suharto & Indriyanto, 2018). Work on performativity in Javanese village ceremony has shown, in parallel, that the ritual body carries analytic weight that a purely symbolic reading misses. None of this work has been brought to bear on an agrarian rite tied to a single commodity crop, where the ritual's bearers are also price-takers in a national industry.

The gap, then, is not an absence of publications on Temanggung, nor on Javanese ritual, but an unexamined case: among tebal has been read politically, and read through fiction, but has never been described as it is performed nor analysed as a problem of transmission. This article is the first to give an ethnographic account of among tebal as practised and to explain its persistence through the joint apparatus of memory theory and performance studies. It pursues two questions. First, how does the memory of Islam Aboge tobacco farmers operate so as to sustain the rite year after year, across generations? Second, how has among tebal developed from an individual observance into a communal ritual performance, and to what end?

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

The study was designed as an ethnography combined with performance studies, a pairing chosen because the two research questions are of different kinds: the first concerns what farmers know and how they came to know it, which is a question about transmission; the second concerns what changes when a rite acquires spectators, which is a question about framing. Performance studies, developed at the intersection of theatre studies and anthropology, extends beyond staged spectacle to ritual, games, pilgrimage and the routines

of daily life, and draws on ethnomusicology, folklore, semiotics, linguistics and literary criticism alike (Murgiyanto, 2015, p. 14).

Four theoretical resources were brought to bear, each at a stated point in the analysis. Oral-tradition theory (Ong, 2002; Vansina, 1973, 1985; Pudentia, 1998) was used at the descriptive stage, to establish that the rite is transmitted through unwritten discourse and to characterise the kind of orality involved. Memory theory was used at the explanatory stage, and here a division of labour should be stated at the outset, because the two accounts drawn on are not straightforwardly compatible. Rubin's (1995) cognitive-psychological account treats memory as individual encoding and retrieval, and is used in this article to explain why the outward form of the rite remains stable in the hands of individual farmers. Halbwachs's (1980, 1992) account treats memory as socially reconstructed from the standpoint of the present, and is used to explain something Rubin's framework cannot address: how the separate memories of individual farmers cohere into a single communal occasion. The two are therefore assigned to different explananda rather than reconciled at the level of theory. Performance theory (Schechner, 1995, 2004, 2006; Finnegan, 1992; Rostas, 1998) was used at the analytic stage, to track the rite's movement from private observance to public staging. Hall's (1996) account of identity, supplemented by Hoed (2014), was used at the interpretive stage, to characterise what the public staging accomplishes for its performers.

Site, Period, and Participants

Fieldwork was carried out across two consecutive tobacco-planting seasons, from February to May 2017 and from February to April 2018, with follow-up visits during the 2018 harvest. The principal site was Desa Legoksari, Kecamatan Tlogomulyo, with sustained attention to two of its hamlets, Dusun Lamok Gunung and Dusun Lamok Legok. Comparative material was gathered in Desa Candisari and Desa Mranggen Kidul, both in Kecamatan Bansari. Legoksari was selected because it lies within the Sumbing zone, where Ki Ageng Makukuhan is believed to be buried and where ritual observance is locally reputed to run deepest; the Bansari villages were selected as contrasting cases in which the communal rite is held almost without fail but the surrounding ritual sequence is observed less intensively.

Two communal performances of among tebal were observed in full, on 17 April 2017 and 2 April 2018, both falling by design on a Monday Pahing. Individual observances of *nyecel* and among tebal were observed on four further occasions across the two seasons. Informants were selected by ritual role and by generational position rather than by convenience. Three generations of active or retired farmers were represented: the eldest surviving generation, by a ritual elder of ninety-two, a farmer of eighty-seven and a farmer of eighty-eight; a middle generation, by a farmer of fifty-two and by a farmer of forty-five who is also a *dalang*, or shadow puppeteer; and the youngest generation of active growers, by a farmer of thirty-five who also chairs his neighbourhood association. Supplementary interviews were conducted with a hamlet head, a village head, the secretary of the regency branch of the Indonesian Tobacco Farmers' Association, and the Deputy Regent of Temanggung for the 2013–2018 term.

The composition of this group requires comment. Ritual authority in these villages is held almost exclusively by male household heads and elders, and the informants whose testimony carries the analysis in the following section reflect that asymmetry. Women are nonetheless central to the ritual's material practice: they assemble the offerings, determine what may substitute for a missing item, carry the tray to the field, and set the seedlings into the holes the men have bored. Four women of the offering-preparing households were accordingly interviewed in the 2018 season, and their observations are reported in the analysis where they bear on it. Their number remains small relative to the male informants, and the account of ritual meaning offered here should be read as weighted toward the interpretations of those who hold ritual office.

Data Collection

Three techniques were used. Life-history interviewing, in the sense given by Kottak (2015, p. 24), was the principal instrument: informants were asked to narrate their own entry into the ritual — when they first attended, from whom they learned, what they were told and what they were left to infer — rather than to describe the ritual in the abstract. This produced, for the eldest informants, recollections reaching back to the 1930s. Participant observation covered the two communal performances and the individual observances, and recorded the sequence of actions, the composition of the offering tray, the division of labour by gender, and the wording of the prayers. Documentary work covered regency statistical publications, regional-history sources and press coverage of the ritual from 2012 onward.

Interviews were conducted in Javanese where informants preferred it, which was the case for all of the eldest generation, and in Indonesian otherwise. All recordings were transcribed in the language of utterance by the author, who is a fluent speaker of both, and translated into English by the author for this article; the original wording is given alongside the translation wherever an utterance is quoted directly. Several offerings carry names built on puns that do not survive translation — the reading of turmeric through *nir ing sambikolo*, “free from harm”, is one such case — and these have been rendered by giving the Javanese form, a literal gloss, and the interpretation that informants themselves supplied, rather than by seeking an English equivalent.

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established by three means. Source triangulation compared accounts of the same ritual element across informants of different generations and different hamlets, and it was in precisely these comparisons that the divergence between stable ritual form and variable ritual interpretation first became visible. Technique triangulation compared what informants said the sequence was against what was observed at the two communal performances and the individual observances. Prolonged engagement across two seasons allowed the 2017 account to be tested against the 2018 performance, and the tabulated comparison presented below is a direct product of that procedure. Summaries of the ritual sequence and of the symbolic readings attributed to each offering were read back to three senior informants during the 2018 season, and their corrections were incorporated.

Analysis proceeded in four steps. Transcripts and field notes were first segmented by ritual element — calendrical calculation, offering, procession, prayer, shared meal, accompanying performance — so that every statement about a given element could be read against every other. Each segment was then coded twice: once for the outward form described, and once for the interpretation of the informant attached to it. The two codings were compared, and it was the systematic mismatch between them — high agreement on form, low agreement on meaning — that generated the article’s central finding about transmission. Finally, the coded material was read against the four theoretical resources named above, in the order and at the points specified there, to produce the argument presented in the following section.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board governed the postgraduate research from which this article derives. Consent was therefore secured by the means available. Permission to conduct research in each village was obtained from the village head before any interview took place; individual informants were told the purpose of the study, that their words might be published, and that they could decline any question or withdraw at any point, and each gave oral consent, which was recorded at the head of the interview. Photography at the communal rites was negotiated separately, both with the field’s owner and with the ritual elder leading the prayer; the two photographs reproduced here are published with the consent of the individuals depicted.

Senior informants asked to be named, regarding attribution as proper acknowledgement of their ritual standing, and their names are therefore given; no informant requested anonymity. The prayers recorded during the rites are spoken publicly at the occasion itself and are not restricted; no esoteric material was sought or is reported.

The author is a journalist and researcher with family ties to the Kedu region and childhood memories of its towns, and came to the field as neither a complete outsider nor a member of the community studied. That position shaped the research in ways worth declaring. Facility in Javanese and familiarity with regional idiom eased rapport with the eldest informants and made life-history interviewing possible without an interpreter. At the same time, a prior professional interest in Temanggung's tobacco politics shaped the questions initially asked, and the early interviews tended toward excise policy until informants themselves redirected the conversation toward ritual. Sympathy for the farmers' position in the value chain is not concealed in what follows, and readers should weigh the account accordingly.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Ritual Sequence and the Aboge Reckoning of Time

Among tebal is not a free-standing ceremony but one station in a sequence that begins before planting and ends after the harvest is sold. Table 1 sets out that sequence as it was described by senior farmers in Desa Legoksari and corroborated in Desa Candisari. The sequence is observed specifically by adherents of Islam Aboge, who are Muslim in every formal sense but who time their observances by a Javanese calendrical system distinct from both the Hijri and the Gregorian.

Table 1. The ritual sequence of tobacco cultivation in Temanggung

Stage	Approximate timing	Ritual significance
<i>Nyecel</i> (also <i>among tani, nyampar bun</i>)	December–January	Hoeing and clearing the field left fallow since the previous harvest; the first rite of the new cycle
<i>Among tebal</i> (also <i>ngelekasi, lekas nandur</i>)	February–early May, timed to each farmer's <i>weton</i>	Planting of the first tobacco seedlings; the rite examined in this article
<i>Ngampat</i>	At the onset of leaf maturity	First picking of leaf, with a <i>selamatan</i> for the shredding tool (<i>gobang</i>)
<i>Ngodek</i>	Mid-August	Picking to the fifth leaf layer
<i>Ngepesi</i>	Following <i>ngodek</i>	Picking of remaining mature leaf; no accompanying rite
<i>Njeblosi</i>	Following <i>ngepesi</i>	Picking of all remaining fully mature leaf
<i>Tungguk</i>	When roughly 60 per cent of the leaf is in	Thanksgiving <i>selamatan</i> , held once income has begun to be realised
<i>Ngundoh / mrothol</i>	Final stage	Last picking of the season

Note. Compiled from interviews with senior farmers in Desa Legoksari (Kecamatan Tlogomulyo) and Desa Candisari (Kecamatan Bansari), 2017–2018 planting seasons.

The timing of every rite in this sequence is calculated, not conventional. Under Aboge reckoning an eight-year cycle (*sewindu*) governs a fixed rule (*patakon*) for locating the first day of each month, and the system's divergence from the Asapon reckoning by a single day is the residue of Sultan Agung's seventeenth-century attempt to harmonise the Javanese and Hijri calendars (Nurdin, as cited in Suryati, 2012, p. 67). Java's calendrical eras have formally cycled

past the Aboge era, which ended in 1936, but Legoksari continues to reckon ritual time by it, and does so with some evident pride.

For ritual purposes connected with tobacco, farmers avoid four categories of day: the anniversary of a parent's death; the *sangar tahun*, the shifting first day of the Aboge year; *puput puser*, the day on which the farmer's own umbilical cord fell away in infancy; and *apes weton*, falling a fixed number of days after the farmer's birth date, that number being the farmer's own *neptu*, or numerological birth value. *Neptu* is calculated by summing values assigned to the seven-day week and to the five-day Javanese market week (*pasaran*): a farmer born on Senin Kliwon carries a *neptu* of twelve, four for Senin and eight for Kliwon. The same figure determines how many seedlings are planted at among tebal. The consequence is that the rite is irreducibly personal: no two farmers in a hamlet are obliged to perform it on the same day, and none can perform it on another's behalf.

The Offerings and Their Symbolic Grammar

The offerings (*sesaji* or *sajen*) are the material core of the rite. Koentjaraningrat (1990, pp. 376–378) defines *sesaji* as an offering directed toward supernatural powers through which cooperation is established between human beings and those powers for the benefit of both, and Sobary (2014) treats them as a necessary medium (*pelantar*) for any ceremony oriented toward nature or God. Sobary reads them additionally as a poetic weapon of the weak; that reading is not contested here, but it is worth noting that offerings of this kind long predate the regulatory apparatus against which they are said to be wielded. Table 2 sets out the principal offerings and the symbolic associations that informants themselves supplied.

Table 2. Principal offerings (*sesaji*) in the among tebal rite and their symbolic associations

Offering	Symbolic association reported by informants
<i>Nasi bakar</i> (grilled rice cone), shallot and red chilli	Devotion directed to God, the outcome resting with Him; the grilling itself an exhortation to work harder, in the spirit of the saying that hardship, like fire on gold, makes a person resilient
<i>Cambah pethek</i> (bean sprouts) with dried anchovy	An unspoken prayer (<i>sastro tan kawedar</i>) that the harvest, and life with it, climb steadily; the fish a sign of vigilance and industry
Egg	The beginning of life: as an egg hatches, so the seedling is expected to become a plant that brings prosperity
<i>Beras kapiroto</i> (turmeric-and-lime rice)	Scattered to the four directions and upward as a ward against misfortune (<i>tolak bala</i>); turmeric read through the pun <i>nir ing sambikolo</i> , “free from harm”
Black rice (<i>beras wungu</i> , from <i>wungu</i> , “to rise”)	A call to rise early, work diligently and stay alert against pests
Palm sugar and coconut	Gratitude to the earth for its yield; read by some, through their red and white, as an allusion to the homeland
Flowers	Fragrance and beauty
<i>Wajik, jenang, jadah</i>	Provision for the shared meal; the hope that sustenance will not run short
Reserved leaf from the previous harvest	Memory of the past yield and the hope of an equal or better one
Dried corn husk (<i>klobot jagung</i>)	Memory of the earliest hand-rolled cigarette in Java
<i>Ponjo</i> (a dibbling stick of <i>dadap srep</i> wood)	A wish, through the pun on <i>asrep</i> , “cool”, for a level head through whatever the season brings

Note. The eleven items listed are those reported consistently across hamlets and observed on the offering tray at both communal rites; the list is illustrative of the core set rather than exhaustive. Individual households add items of local or family significance, and money is placed on the tray in lieu of any item that could not be obtained, as a symbolic redemption.

Two features of this array bear on the argument that follows. The first is that its composition has remained essentially fixed for as long as living memory extends. Mbah Yasto, ninety-two at the time of the fieldwork, learned the offerings from his parents, who told him they had performed the rite since their own childhood; Mbah Prayit, eighty-eight, put the matter more flatly: “*Tahun 40 aku wis melu among tebal lan tungguk. Sajene yo koyo ngono*” (“By 1940 I was already taking part in among tebal and tungguk. The offerings were just as they are now”). The second is that the *meaning* attached to each item varies considerably from farmer to farmer, a divergence taken up below. Bu Sriyati, who has assembled the tray for her household for some thirty years, was precise about proportion and substitution — which flowers may stand in for which, how much palm sugar is enough — and indifferent to the readings her husband supplied: what mattered, she said, was that nothing be missing.

The Individual Rite in the Field

The communal rite opens with a procession carrying the prepared offerings and the seedlings to a field agreed at a hamlet meeting; in 2017 and 2018 alike, the plot chosen in Dusun Lamok Gunung belonged to Rame Purwadi, for its convenient position partway up the slope of Gunung Sumbing. The party divides by gender, men carrying tools and food, women the offerings. On arrival it waits for villagers still completing the *nyadran sungai* rite at a nearby spring, where an offering cone of local produce (*bucu robyong*) is carried to the water, blessed and distributed. Only when everyone has gathered does planting begin.

Where the spring procession is led by the village’s senior elder, among tebal is led by the field’s owner. Figure 1 shows the moment: Pak Rame seated cross-legged with the tray before him, the gathered households standing behind and beside him. He prays silently, lights *kemenyan*, rises, scatters *beras kapiroto* to the four directions and then upward. At his signal the men bore holes with the *ponjo* and the women set the seedlings — thirteen, in his case, since he was born on Senin Pahing, four plus nine. The seedlings are placed somewhat at random along the plot’s northern edge and function less as a literal planting than as a declaration that the farmer stands ready to tend the crop. The group then shares the food from the tray in the field.



Figure 1. The field owner leads the communal among tebal rite, the offerings arrayed before him, as farming households of the hamlet stand in witness before the first seedlings are set into the ground.

Photograph by the author, Dusun Lamok Gunung, Desa Legoksari, Temanggung, 2 April 2018. Reproduced with the consent of those depicted.

Parmudi, fifty-two, born on Rabu Pahing and therefore planting sixteen seedlings each year, described his own individual observance as identical in form to the communal one and wholly different in atmosphere. He walks to the field in rubber sandals and removes them at its edge.

“If we consider the earth sacred, it becomes sacred. *Bumi* means *ibu mami*, my mother. The soil is our mother, the place where we eat and drink and live, because sustenance comes from the earth, not from the sky.” The solitary rite, he said, is a two-way communication with God mediated by unseen beings, which the more festive communal occasion does not quite replicate. Sutopo, forty-five, a farmer and *dalang* from Dusun Lamok Legok, framed the same point in terms of what the rite is for: “The hope is always there — asking for an extra measure of safety, because where there is safety, there is fortune. *Pinaringan rahayu wilujeng*. So if a neighbour gets *srinthil* and I don’t, that’s fine. No envy.” Several farmers made the same point independently: the rite petitions for a safe life, not a wealthy one.

This is the sense in which Vansina’s (1985) observation about occasion holds with unusual precision here. Every tradition, he argues, has its proper time of performance, and the frequency of repetition is what guards against forgetting. Among *tebal* is performed annually, by every farmer, at a date each calculates individually, and then again communally at a date agreed by the hamlet; the occasion is thus doubly fixed, and the rite is rehearsed twice a year by every household that owns tobacco land. Repetition on this scale is the elementary mechanism of the persistence this article sets out to explain.

Memory and the Stability of Ritual Form

Why does the form of the rite hold so steady while its interpretation drifts? Rubin (1995, p. 130), drawing on Bartlett, distinguishes two methods by which remembered material is studied and, in effect, two channels along which it travels: repeated reproduction, in which a person recalls something by performing it again themselves, and serial reproduction, in which material passes from one retelling to the next along a chain. Distortion is markedly more pronounced under the second. Among Temanggung’s tobacco farmers, ritual knowledge travels overwhelmingly by the first: a child accompanies a parent to the field for a decade or more, watches the tray assembled and the prayer spoken, and eventually performs the rite personally, annually, for fifty years. Almost nothing is transmitted by being told.

This explains the pattern the coding procedure disclosed. Where distortion appears, it appears in the interpretive layer — what the black rice signifies, why turmeric — rather than in the outward form, which nearly every farmer reproduces faithfully whether or not they can account for it. Because the rite is fundamentally individual, no one is charged with supervising it or judging whether it was performed correctly; each farmer answers for their own observance, and the depth of understanding each brings to it varies accordingly. Stability of form and variability of meaning are not, on this account, in tension: they are the two predictable outputs of a transmission channel that conveys action richly and explanation poorly.

Two contrasting cases make the mechanism visible. Gino, thirty-five, accompanied his father Suparto Parman to the fields as a child, but Suparto had himself relied chiefly on watching and asking rather than on any deeper grounding, and when asked directly to explain the sequence deferred to Parmudi, admitting he no longer recalled the details. Gino accordingly learned the rite not from his father but from older siblings and from Parmudi, seventeen years his senior. Broken transmission from parent to child, in other words, need not sever a household’s connection to the tradition, provided the younger generation remains willing to learn from others — though Gino’s sociability and standing in the hamlet cannot be assumed of every young farmer, and it is precisely here that the chain is thinnest.

Mbah Yasto illustrates the opposite case. Father of seven, grandfather of nineteen and great-grandfather of twenty-two, he began accompanying his father and grandfather to the fields in 1936, at the age of ten, and once he had land of his own performed the rite independently, having also studied with a local *kiai* to learn the mixed Javanese and Arabic prayer he still recites. He no longer farms — his land passed long ago to his descendants and he now keeps

goats — but is asked each year to lead the communal prayer. Figure 2 shows him at ninety-two.



Figure 2. Mbah Yasto, at ninety-two the eldest ritual elder (*sesepuh*) of Dusun Lamok Gunung, Desa Legoksari, who continues to be asked each year to lead the communal among tebal prayer.

Photograph by the author, Desa Legoksari, Temanggung, 2 April 2018. Reproduced with his consent.

An exchange from one of the life-history interviews, translated from Javanese, shows both the reach and the self-aware limits of that memory:

Researcher: Do you know the full sequence of among tebal, its calculations and its offerings?

Mbah Yasto: As a small child, no. But over time you come to know it by heart. What *beras kapiroto* means, what *cambah pethek* means — you learn all that once you are older.

Researcher: What if an offering is missed or forgotten?

Mbah Yasto: An offering is the bond between human feeling and the unseen. If something is missing you leave money instead, as a redemption, so they can buy it themselves at the market. When you set down the offering and the money you say, “*Ngapunten menawi ubo rampe wonten kekiranganipun*” (“Forgive me if the offering is in any way lacking”).

Researcher: What would happen if people stopped performing the rite?

Mbah Yasto: I don’t know for certain. But decades ago a whirlwind came down off the mountain, strong enough to bring down houses and roof tiles and make people ill. I am quite certain a great many people had failed to perform the rite that year when they planted. The tobacco went unblest. Ki Ageng Makukuhan was angry. The crop turned out badly and would not sell.

Two things are worth drawing out of this. The first is the redemption clause: a rite whose material requirements can be discharged with money, accompanied by an apology, is a rite built to survive scarcity, and this flexibility is itself a mechanism of persistence rather than a dilution of it. The second is the causal story attached to the whirlwind, which is not a doctrine anyone taught but an inference drawn retrospectively from a remembered disaster — an instance of what Thompson (2015, p. 133) describes as memory formation dependent on the process of perception itself, in which the past is reconstituted through the categories available to reconstitute it. The consequence for practice is considerable: as Mbah Yasto put it, no one dares skip among tebal for as long as they hold tobacco land.

This finding qualifies Rubin’s framework rather than merely applying it. Rubin’s account was developed for verbal genres — epic, ballad, counting-out rhyme — in which the material transmitted is itself text, and in which mnemonic constraints such as metre and rhyme carry the stability. Here the transmitted material is action, and the stabilising constraint is the annual agricultural calendar, which compels performance whether or not anyone remembers what

the performance means. Where Rubin finds form preserved by the structure of the remembered text, this case finds form preserved by the structure of the remembered occasion.

From Individual Devotion to Communal Performance

The second question concerns what happens when the rite acquires spectators. Halbwachs (1980, p. 23) argues that memory remains collective because we are never in fact alone, and that recollection is sustained by others even for events at which only we were present. Applied here, the framework explains what Rubin's cannot: how the separate observances of a hundred and fifty households become a single occasion. Farmers of Legoksari perform among tebal twice, individually and communally, and the duplication is not redundancy. It preserves the sacredness of the private rite while allowing farmers, consciously or otherwise, to separate what is fit for public display from what remains exclusive to themselves — a separation that Halbwachs's account of memory as reconstructed from the standpoint of the present predicts, since it is the present occasion, and its audience, that determines which version of the past is assembled.

Schechner's (2006) parsing of performance into being, doing, showing doing and explaining showing doing can now be closed off against this material, having been introduced above. Among tebal as a rite inherited and available to be performed is *being*: the form exists in the community whether or not any given farmer enacts it this season. The individual observance in the field, carried out quietly at a calculated date with no audience beyond the household, is *doing*: activity that follows from what exists. The communal occasion — procession, costume, the elder's prayer spoken before an assembly, the evening *wayang* — is *showing doing*: the same activity framed for display and marked as worth watching. The present article, finally, is *explaining showing doing*. The value of the schema here is that it locates the transformation precisely: what changed between the individual and the communal rite is neither the sequence nor the offerings, both of which are preserved intact, but the frame — the addition of spectators and of the heightening that spectators occasion. This is Finnegan's (1992, p. 91) definition of performance as a mode of communication set apart from the everyday by the accentuation of its formal qualities, and it is also the relation Rostas (1998) identifies among the *concheros* of Mexico, where a rite contains an element of performance and the performance that follows contains an element of rite.

The communal occasion has grown markedly in scale. For the 2018 observance, 150 households in Dusun Lamok Gunung each contributed Rp 200,000, raising some Rp 30 million toward a celebration that drew elders from neighbouring villages, the subdistrict head of Tlogomulyo, a representative of the Regent and several cultural associations. Among tebal has become, in Parmudi's words, something like Legoksari's own high holiday, more festive even than Idul Fitri. The funding arrangement is worth noting: contributions are calibrated so as not to burden any single household, with the effect that the communal rite cross-subsidises smaller farmers who could not meet the cost of an elaborate individual observance alone.

Press attention has accelerated the process. The 2016 communal rite in Desa Mranggen Kidul, held on 3 May well after most farmers had completed their individual observances, drew the Governor of Central Java, who joined a procession of *tumpeng* and produce-laden *gunungan*, planted a seedling and urged the roughly four thousand farmers present to protect the surrounding forest and water sources (Nuswantoro, 2016). The *jaman srobong gobang* ceremony in Desa Tlilir in May 2017 expanded into a two-day *jaran kepan* performance and a village-wide costumed procession — an elaboration that startled even Sutopo, who was present: "Saya saja heran pertunjukannya bisa semeriah itu" ("Even I was amazed the performance could be this elaborate"). Organisers rarely approach the press directly; coverage typically originates with the regency public-relations office or with reporters encountered on other tobacco stories. The pattern corresponds to what Pudentia (2015, p. 480) describes as

community-based cultural partnership, in which government positions the community as a working partner rather than as an object of programming.

That the communal rite varies from year to year while its sequence holds is precisely what oral-tradition theory would predict. Table 3 compares the two observances studied directly.

Table 3. The communal among tebal in Dusun Lamok Gunung: 2017 and 2018 compared

Element	17 April 2017	2 April 2018
Javanese calendar date	Senin Pahing	Senin Pahing
Field used	Plot of Rame Purwadi	Plot of Rame Purwadi (same)
Household hosting the <i>selamatan</i>	Gino's household	Mbah Suker's household
Chair of the organising committee	Appointed for 2017	Different chair appointed for 2018
Attire of participants	Distinct from 2018	Distinct from 2017
Participants	Overlapping but not identical	Overlapping but not identical
Evening wayang	At Gino's house, <i>dalang</i> Sutopo	Not centred at the same location
Sequence, offerings, purpose	Unchanged	Unchanged

Note. Compiled from the author's participant observation at both rites (see Ivvaty, 2019, for the fuller field record).

The texture of the occasion — who hosted, who chaired, what was worn, even the shape into which the rice cone was pressed and the size into which the *wajik* and *jadah* were cut — differed in ways no two performances could fully replicate, while sequence, offerings and purpose held constant. This confirms directly what Paeni (2015) and Pudentia (2000, pp. 40–41) argue about oral tradition in general, that it renews itself at every repetition and that performance is by nature singular (*einmalig*), and it supports Murgiyanto's (2004) stronger claim that a tradition can undergo substantial change while its inheritors perceive no rupture at all. The Temanggung case adds a specification to that literature: variation and stability are not distributed randomly across a rite but sort by function. What is calculated — the date, the seedling count, the offering set — resists change because it is derived from a rule; what is staged — host, dress, scale, accompanying performance — varies freely because nothing in the rule governs it.

Ritual Performance as an Assertion of Farmer Identity

What the public register accomplishes is best approached through the functions the rite performs for those who stage it. Rusyana (2008) divides the functions of oral tradition by beneficiary, into a personal function serving the bearer and a social function serving the group, and among tebal, performed both individually and communally, satisfies both at once: even a farmer who misses the communal occasion in a given year experiences both, simply by belonging to a community that holds it. Tuloli (as cited in Asrif, 2015) groups the functions instead as practical and ideological, and the fieldwork supplies an instance of each. The practical is visible in the redemption clause described above, which allows a household without means to discharge its obligation without shame; the ideological in Mbah Yasto's whirlwind, which supplies a sanction no institution enforces. Finnegan (1992, pp. 126–127) catalogues a wider range still, of which four fit this case with precision: reinforcing tradition, bridging the spiritual and the human, uniting people, and entertaining an audience that now includes journalists and visiting officials as well as fellow villagers. Notably absent from the

list of fits is the function Sobary's reading would foreground — challenging political authority — which the communal rite in these villages does not do.

Hall (1996) argues that identity becomes necessary at the point where a person feels themselves eroded, threatened or on the verge of loss, and that identity is grasped through identification and through characteristic traits. Temanggung's tobacco farmers have, in an important sense, already absorbed that erosion: months of arduous labour ultimately profit traders and manufacturers more than the growers, who renegotiate a price with no fixed standard every season. They continue to plant tobacco and to perform the rite even where doing so requires expenditure they can ill afford. The rite functions, in this light, as self-affirmation — a way of steadying the self — and the trait through which the identity is grasped is specific: these are farmers who are not coffee farmers.

That specificity is not rhetorical. Temanggung's uplands suit arabica and robusta well, the regency is already recognised as one of Central Java's better coffee areas, and regional government has pursued diversification through extension programmes, seedling distribution and successive coffee festivals. The uptake has been slight: of an estimated 51,958 people whose livelihood is tied to tobacco, only 8,559, about fifteen per cent, had taken up arabica despite some fifteen years of distribution effort, because, as the reporting put it, the tobacco-farming community still finds it difficult to shift to another commodity (Nuswantoro, 2016). The difficulty is not agronomic. A change of crop would mean abandoning a body of practice — the calendar, the calculation, the offerings, the sequence of rites — sustained for well over a century, for which coffee offers no equivalent. Among tebal exists for tobacco and for nothing else.

This is where the present findings diverge most sharply from the existing literature on Temanggung. Sobary (2014, 2016) reads farmers' ceremonial practice as resistance, and for the constituency he studied — the activist farmers of Laskar Kretek, encountered at a mass political gathering — the reading is apt. In Legoksari and Mranggen, what the staging displays is not confrontation but custodianship: farmers seek recognition as bearers of an inherited practice far more than they seek confrontation with regulators, manufacturers or middlemen. The divergence is best explained by sampling rather than by disagreement about the facts. Resistance is performed where there is an adversary present to perform it against; the communal among tebal is performed in a village field before neighbours, kin and, latterly, a subdistrict head. The same farmers may well be capable of both registers; the occasion selects which one is staged. Read this way, the present findings complement rather than contradict Sobary's, and suggest that his "poetic resistance" and the custodianship described here are two public faces of a single repertoire.

Whether this amounts to a cultural identity in the full sense follows Hoed (2014, p. 132), for whom cultural identity is a collective identity latent in individuals who share a history, made visible when practice is set into space as a marker functioning as an extension of the self (Danesi & Perron, 1999). The among tebal performed on the slopes of Sumbing and Sindoro occupies exactly such a space: in performing it, farmers assert an identity that distinguishes them from other occupations and leaves them, as several put it, feeling safe and clearly seen. That identity doubles as a bargaining position. The informal recognition of Desa Legoksari and Desa Mranggen as customary villages (*desa adat*) both reinforces the identity and evidences its success, and the rite has grown steadily more elaborate as local government facilitation has increased.

Memory Work and Public Display: The Two Questions Answered

To the first question — how farmers' memory sustains the rite — the evidence presented above gives a specific answer. Memory sustains among tebal because the rite is transmitted by repeated reproduction rather than serial retelling, and because the occasion of its performance

is fixed by an agricultural calendar that compels annual repetition. The outward form is therefore extremely stable across three generations, while the interpretations attached to it vary widely, and the variation does not threaten the rite because the interpretive layer is not what is transmitted. Stability rests, further, on a cultural homogeneity that should be stated rather than assumed: the bearers are almost without exception tobacco farmers, adherents of Islam Aboge, and residents of land their families have held for generations. Where any of these conditions weakens — as with Gino, whose paternal chain broke — the transmission depends on lateral relationships within the hamlet to repair it.

To the second question — how the rite became communal, and to what end — the answer is that the individual rite was not replaced but reframed. The communal occasion adds spectators, and with them the heightening, elaboration and accompanying artistry that constitute performance in Schechner's and Finnegan's sense, while leaving sequence, calculation and offerings intact. It serves three ends that the fieldwork makes visible: it redistributes the cost of ritual across a hamlet, so that poorer households are not priced out; it transfers the rite to a younger generation by giving each household a public stake in it; and it asserts, before an audience that now includes the press and the regional state, an identity as tobacco growers who intend to remain tobacco growers. Persistence, on this account, is not inertia. It is the outcome of a transmission channel well suited to conveying action, coupled with a deliberate decision to put that action on public display.

CONCLUSION

Among tebal persists in Temanggung not because the community is insulated from change but because the rite is transmitted along a channel that change does not easily interrupt. Farmers learn it by accompanying their elders to the field for years and then performing it annually for decades, so that what is conveyed is action rather than explanation. The consequence, visible throughout the material presented here, is a rite whose outward form has held steady across at least three generations while the meanings attached to its individual elements vary from one farmer to the next. That asymmetry is not a sign of decay. It is the predictable signature of repeated reproduction, and it indicates that the durability of an agrarian rite depends less on the survival of its exegesis than on the survival of the occasion that obliges its performance. The rite's development into a communal ritual performance follows the same logic: spectators were added, and with them procession, costume and accompanying artistry, while the calculated core — the date, the seedling count, the offering set — was left untouched. What the public register accomplishes is the assertion, before neighbours, officials and the press alike, of an identity as tobacco growers who decline to become growers of anything else.

The contribution is twofold. Empirically, the article supplies the first account of among tebal as it is practised, where the existing literature had read it either through the register of political resistance or through its representation in fiction, and it shows that these readings capture different public faces of a single repertoire rather than competing descriptions of one. Theoretically, it specifies where memory theory and performance theory divide the labour of explanation in cases of this kind: a cognitive account of individual remembering explains the stability of ritual form, a social account of collective memory explains how individual observances cohere into a communal occasion, and a performance account explains what the addition of an audience changes and what it leaves alone. The case also qualifies the cognitive account it borrows, since the stabilising constraint here is not the structure of a remembered text but the structure of a remembered occasion, imposed by an agricultural calendar.

The study has clear limits. It is confined to one regency and, within it, chiefly to villages of the Sumbing zone where ritual observance is locally reputed to run deepest, so that the account may describe the strong end of a range rather than its centre. The fieldwork spans two

consecutive seasons, which is enough to document year-on-year variation but not enough to observe generational change directly. Informants who agreed to speak at length about the ritual are, predictably, those disposed to support it, and farmers who have quietly abandoned the rite are not represented. Ritual authority in these villages is held by men, and the account of ritual meaning offered here is weighted toward that constituency notwithstanding the women interviewed. Nothing in the material, finally, is drawn from the period after 2018.

Two vulnerabilities deserve attention, and both point toward the research that should follow. The first is generational succession: the transmission chain documented here depends on young farmers remaining on the land, and where the paternal chain breaks it depends on lateral relationships within the hamlet that cannot be assumed to persist as out-migration increases. The second is land-use pressure, since sustained official promotion of coffee on the same slopes offers no ritual equivalent to the tobacco calendar, and any substantial conversion would leave the rite without an occasion. Longitudinal work following a cohort of young farmers across a decade would test the first directly; comparative work in the Sindoro and Prau zones, where observance is reported to be lighter, would establish whether the pattern described here is general to Temanggung or particular to Sumbing; and attention to the women who assemble the offerings would recover a body of practical ritual knowledge that the present study has touched only at its edges.

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