JOURNAL OF LOCAL CULTURE STUDY
Vol. 04, No. 01, June 2026, pp. 61-76
e-ISSN 3026-4561 | https://locusjournal.org/index.php/locuss

Topeng Dheleng Sumenep as Ritual and Cultural Performance in a Madurese Wedding Celebration

Surya Farid Sathotho [a,1,*], Yulini Arediningsih [b,2]

[a] Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, Jl. Parangtritis Km. 6.5, Bantul 55188, Indonesia
[b] Global Asset Care, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

[1] suryafarid@isi.ac.id*; [2] aredingsih.yulini@gmail.com
ORCID: [1] 0000-0002-0366-991X; [2] 0000-0000-0000-0000

* Corresponding author

Article history: Received: 1 Jan 2026 | Revised: 1 April 2026 | Accepted: 1 May 2026 | Published: 1 June 2026
Article type: Research Article
DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.33292/locus.v4i01.35

ABSTRACT

Masked puppeteer theatre in Java and Madura is commonly described as secular entertainment, yet the Topeng Dheleng of Sumenep, Madura, remains bound to *rokat*, a rite for warding off misfortune. In this genre all performers are masked men, every voice is supplied by a single puppeteer, and the repertoire favours the Mahabharata and Ramayana over the Panji cycle; previous studies have treated it chiefly as an aesthetic, historical, or documentary object. This article examines the genre as both a cultural performance and a ritual performance. Using a qualitative, descriptive-inductive design, it analyses an all-night performance by the Rukun Perawas group at a wedding in Semaan Village, Dasuk District, Sumenep, in June 2024, drawing on participant observation, video documentation, and semi-structured interviews with a puppeteer, a performer, and a mask maker. The data are interpreted through Turner's distinction between rites of passage and calendrical rites, Schechner's efficacy–entertainment continuum, and the concept of cultural performance developed by Singer and Carlson. The performance unfolds in three stages, closing with the Rokat Pandhaba, and transmits communal values of mutual assistance, economic solidarity, and conventionalised cross-gender representation. It is a rite of passage for the couple but acquires a calendrical character across the community, and its most entertaining scenes draw the densest audience participation. Ritual efficacy and theatrical appeal therefore reinforce rather than compete with each other, and safeguarding the genre as intangible cultural heritage must attend to its ritual function as well as its aesthetic form.

KEYWORDS

Communitas
Efficacy–entertainment continuum
Passage rites
Rokat Pandhaba
Rukun Perawas

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

How to cite: Sathotho, S. F., & Arediningsih, Y. (2026). Topeng Dheleng Sumenep as ritual and cultural performance in a Madurese wedding celebration. *Journal of Local Culture Studies,* 4(1), 61-76. https://doi.org/ 10.33292/locus.v4i01.35

INTRODUCTION

The identity of a culture becomes visible in several ways, one of which is artistic expression (Mardotillah & Zein, 2017). Among the traditional arts, folk performing arts are one of the most important of these expressions (Adityatama et al., 2024), so that the culture of a community can be approached through the performances its people make. Topeng Dheleng is a variant of masked puppeteer theatre that developed in Sumenep, at the eastern end of Madura. The word *dheleng* means *dhalang* (puppeteer), so Topeng Dheleng may equally be rendered Topeng Dhalang, the puppeteer's mask theatre. All of its performers are men who wear masks (*tokop*) according to the characters they play (Soelarto, 1978), while the dialogue of every character, male or female, is voiced by a single puppeteer. Its plays are generally drawn from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, unlike most variants of Topeng Dhalang elsewhere, which are based on the Panji story. The Panji story also spread to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar; in mainland Southeast Asia it is known as Inao (Jatuthasri, 2018), a knight believed to return at the end of time (Brandon, 2003).

The Panji story performed in Topeng Dheleng is known as Raden Wijaya Kusuma from Polo Salaka. According to local legend, the daughter of the King of Panjalu, later known as Putri Sekar Sari (Sukasari), once stopped at Polo Salaka, one of the territories of the Panjalu kingdom, and it was there that Dewi Sukasari was reunited with Raden Panji Wijaya Kusuma. The Polo Salaka story is now rarely staged except at the special request of the *shohibul hajat* (host of the celebration) at a wedding, although the Topeng Dheleng group in Dasuk District (Slopeng) still performs it fairly often (Darus, 2014).

Topeng Dheleng is generally performed at celebrations held by the people of Sumenep, both weddings and *rokat*. Functionally, the community uses it as a means of *rokat*, or *mowang sangkal* (casting off misfortune) (Prihantini, 2017), as well as entertainment. A performance is divided into three stages. The opening stage comprises the opening *gendhing* (gamelan composition), Gendhing Puspowarno; the *temangan*, in which money is presented to the bride and groom to the accompaniment of Gendhing Angleng Seten; the puppeteer's prologue, which conveys greetings of reunion, gratitude, and congratulations to the host; and an opening dance, usually the Klana Tonjung Seto dance or another dance requested by the host. The middle stage presents a selected play from the Ramayana or Mahabharata. The final stage is the Rokat Pandhaba (Chair, 2020), which consists of a masked performance of the obligatory Bathara Kala story followed by the core rites of purification, redemption through payment of the *ijab khobul*, and the Pabelian Sape. A performance customarily lasts from 21.00 to 04.00 Western Indonesian Time (WIB).

What distinguishes Topeng Dheleng from Topeng Dhalang in other regions, then, is its ritual dimension. Where masked puppeteer theatre elsewhere has largely become profane entertainment, Topeng Dheleng remains a means of *rokat*, a ceremony to dispel the bad luck and calamity that befall or threaten a person or a group (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996). As a ritual performance, it shows how a staged event can carry ritual values that remain alive in the everyday life of its supporting community (Li & Phanlukthao, 2024).

Historically, the religious aspect has been inseparable from theatrical events (Carlson, 1998, p. 5). Prehistoric artefacts show signs of singing and dancing as forms of worship (Hartnoll, 1995, p. 7); ritual is widely held to be the origin of theatre (Carlson & Shafer, 1990, p. 7); and traditional theatre in Indonesia is still closely identified with ritual (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996, p. 13). The cultural content of a tradition is transmitted through specific cultural media, whose organised forms are referred to as cultural performances (Carlson, 1998, p. 14). Murgiyanto (2018, p. 18) adds that such content is wrapped in performances that can be shown both to outsiders and to members of the community itself, among them weddings, concerts, dances, and dramas (Carlson, 1998, p. 18; Murgiyanto, 2018, p. 27; Simatupang, 2013, p. 63). Schechner's view that theatre and ritual are so closely bound that each may be examined through the other (as cited in Murgiyanto, 2018, pp. 52–56), together with Turner's (1982, pp.

73–74) argument in *From Ritual to Theatre* that social drama and stage drama stand in a dialogical relationship, makes a theatrical study of Topeng Dheleng both possible and productive.

Scholarship on Topeng Dheleng is limited and falls into three lines. A first line is documentary and historical. Soelarto's (1978) *Topeng Madura (Topong)* and Timoer's (1979) *Topeng Dhalang di Jawa Timur* describe the genre, and Hanto (1997) traces the shift of Madurese masked puppeteer theatre from court art to folk theatre, a trajectory that places Topeng Dheleng within a wider East Javanese tradition grown from palace roots (Hanto, 1997; Timoer, 1979). A second line addresses function and transmission. Larasati (1991) examines the function and symbolic value of Topeng Dhalang in Marengan, Sumenep, where performance often serves both as celebratory entertainment and as supplication for safety, while Kusmayati (2002) studies the transmission of the performance practice of the Rukun Perawas group. A third line is aesthetic and applied. Pratama and Hidayat (2015) produced a photographic essay book to preserve Sumenep's traditional culture, and Wiyono et al. (2013) designed visual communication to revitalise the Topeng Dhalang dance for Madura's tourism programme. Most recently, Wibowo (2022), studying the genre between 2000 and 2010, found that most people preferred newer cultural forms and regarded Topeng Dheleng as an antiquated art whose admirers were old people indifferent to progress.

These studies have established the genre's history, its place in the East Javanese mask tradition, and its declining popularity, but they treat Topeng Dheleng chiefly as an aesthetic, documentary, or endangered artefact. None has examined how performance structure and ritual structure intertwine within a single complete *rokat* event, or how the ritual value of the performance is sustained for its community today. The connection between ritual and theatre is not peculiar to Topeng Dheleng. Soedarsono (1985) argues that the religious-magical function of traditional performing arts is among the most enduring continuities of cultural history, and traditions ranging from Barong and Rangda in Bali and Reog Ponorogo to the *ruwatan* (exorcistic purification) performances of Javanese *wayang* make performance a vehicle of cosmological balance. Van Peursen's (1976, pp. 34–35) account of the mythical stage of cultural strategy further suggests why such rites persist in a society that has meanwhile met modernity through migration, tourism, and stage technology. This article is the first to analyse a complete Topeng Dheleng performance simultaneously as a cultural performance and as a ritual performance. It asks what form the Topeng Dheleng performance takes as a cultural performance, and how Topeng Dheleng can be understood as a ritual performance.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative method, understood as a systematic inquiry into a problem that can be answered through evidence (Sahid, 2017). A qualitative design was chosen because it can describe, explain, and relate categories of data so that a phenomenon is understood in its full context. Qualitative research, in Bogdan and Taylor's (1993) formulation, produces descriptive data, and it does not rest on statistical relations between variables (Endraswara, 2006). Endraswara (2006) notes further that the method adapts readily to the multiple realities encountered in the field, makes the relationship between researcher and respondent explicit, and remains sensitive to the patterns of value the researcher confronts.

Research Design and Approach

The study adopted an ethnographic, descriptive-inductive design centred on a single performance event, read through three frameworks that share the premise that ritual and theatre have common historical roots (Carlson & Shafer, 1990; Hartnoll, 1995). The first is Victor Turner's distinction between rites of passage, which a person undergoes once in a lifetime, and calendrical rites, which are held periodically and may be experienced repeatedly

(Turner, 1982, p. 25). Rituals of this kind are bound to human attempts to explain the puzzles of the environment. The fertility rites of agrarian societies, for instance, seek to prevent forces beyond human power, such as erratic seasons or pests, from affecting crops, and they express communal ideals about the fertility of land as well as of men and women (Soedarsono, 1985). Such tendencies are common in societies in what Van Peursen (1976, pp. 34–35) calls the mythical stage of thought, where natural and human events are understood as tied to forces that cannot be explained in rational-technical terms.

The second framework is the concept of cultural performance formulated by Milton Singer, as discussed by Carlson (1998, p. 14), according to which the cultural content of a tradition is transmitted through specific cultural media. Describing how these contents are arranged and transformed on particular occasions helps to reveal the cultural structure of the tradition concerned (Murgiyanto, 2018, p. 18). In this light, Topeng Dheleng is treated as a performance whose formative elements and performative effects on its community can both be analysed (Schechner, 2006, pp. 1–2). The third is Schechner's (2006) efficacy–entertainment continuum, which places every performance between two poles: ritual efficacy, a change of condition believed to occur in the participants or their environment, and entertainment, the aesthetic satisfaction of an audience. The continuum suits Topeng Dheleng because the performance must simultaneously achieve the efficacy of *rokat* and entertain those who attend.

The frameworks were applied in layers. Turner's distinction classifies the rites that accompany the performance and is used chiefly in the discussion of rites of passage and calendrical rites; Schechner's continuum explains how ritual and entertainment complement each other in a single event and organises the discussion of ritual and theatrical efficacy; and the concept of cultural performance frames the analysis of Topeng Dheleng as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values to its community.

Site, Period, and Participants

The corpus is one Topeng Dheleng performance by the Rukun Perawas group, staged during a wedding celebration in Semaan Village, Dasuk District, Sumenep Regency, on the night of 12–13 June 2024. Semaan lies north of the regency town, about 30 minutes away by motor vehicle, and most of its residents are fishers and farmers. The group was selected because it is one of the Topeng Dheleng troupes still performing plays drawn from Polo Salaka, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana while retaining the full structure of the *rokat* rite in every performance. Three informants were selected for the distinct positions they occupy in the production: Ahmad Darus, the puppeteer; Zainal, a principal performer who specialises in female roles; and Ahmad, a maker of masks.

Data Collection

Because the object of study is a rite, data came primarily from participant observation of the performance, which was recorded on video to support later analysis. Observation covered the whole event, from the preparation of performers backstage to the end of the performance and the *rokat* in the early morning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three informants, and a literature study drew on books, media reports, and print and online journals. The interview guide was organised in three clusters: the history and organisation of the group, including its division of roles and the regeneration of performers; performance technique, including mask making, the puppeteer's vocal technique, costume design, and the use of properties and stage technology; and the meaning and function of the rite, including the informant's understanding of *rokat*, the stages of the Rokat Pandhaba, and personal experience of the role. Interviews followed the flow of preparation and performance rather than a fixed order of questions, which allowed relevant information beyond the researchers' initial expectations to emerge.

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established through source triangulation. Interview data from the three informants, who occupy different positions as puppeteer, performer, and mask maker, were compared with one another, with the field observations, and with the literature, in order to avoid the bias of any single informant and to view the same event from several vantage points. The analysis proceeded in stages. An initial literature study mapped previous research and assembled the theoretical frameworks, and field exploration identified the Rukun Perawas group as an active troupe willing to take part. After fieldwork, interviews were transcribed, field notes arranged, and the video documentation reviewed to recover details not noted during observation.

The classified data were first described as facts and then analysed inductively (Endraswara, 2006). An inductive procedure was preferred because it is better able to surface the facts contained in the data and so answer the research questions; it makes the relationship between researcher and respondent more explicit, recognisable, and accountable; it can describe the setting as a whole and support judgements about whether findings may be transferred to other settings; and it is more likely to reveal shared influences that sharpen relationships while accounting explicitly for values as part of the analytical structure. The categories that emerged, namely performers, performance structure, dramaturgy, technique, setting, economy, audience participation, and the stages of the rite, were then read against the three frameworks to build the argument set out in the following section.

Research Ethics and Positionality

Before the performance began, the research team introduced themselves and explained the purpose of their presence to the host and to the leader of the Rukun Perawas group, so that observation and recording were carried out with the knowledge and permission of the parties concerned. The team of four attended as outsiders, with no prior kinship or acquaintance with the host or the group. This position had a double consequence. Guest status gave the researchers privileged access to hospitality and the freedom to converse with performers before the show, but outsider status may also have limited what informants were willing to share, particularly about the more personal or sacred aspects of the rite. The interpretation offered here is therefore a reading from an observer's standpoint rather than a final representation of what Topeng Dheleng means to its community. Because the team was not involved in the ritual preparations that preceded the day of the performance, such as choosing the date or preparing offerings, the analysis concentrates on the performance event itself.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Topeng Dheleng as a Cultural Performance

Sumenep Regency lies at the eastern tip of Madura Island. Most of its population works in agriculture and fisheries, and the region has developed a distinctive culture in which many expressions reflect the close relation between people and nature. Past cultural relations with the Javanese kingdoms are also visible in its arts, and Topeng Dheleng shows a strong connection with Javanese, and especially East Javanese, culture (Ahmad Darus, personal communication, 12 June 2024). As the easternmost regency of Madura, bordering a cluster of small islands in the Java Sea and the Madura Strait, Sumenep has a layered cultural character. It inherits closeness to the Javanese kingdoms through past trade and migration, yet it has developed peculiarities that distinguish it both from the rest of East Java and from the other Madurese regencies of Bangkalan, Sampang, and Pamekasan. Topeng Dheleng embodies one such peculiarity: although it formally adopts the conventions of East Javanese masked puppeteer theatre, in substance it weaves plays and ritual functions specific to Sumenep,

evident in the dominance of Mahabharata and Ramayana stories over the Panji cycle and in its firm attachment to *rokat*.

The performance analysed here was held in the context of a wedding. A reception took place at midday on 12 June 2024 and was followed that night by Topeng Dheleng, which ran from about 22.00 until 03.00 WIB. The research team arrived at about 19.30 WIB. Although unknown to the host, the team was welcomed and served refreshments as invited guests, a courtesy not extended to other spectators, since refreshments were generally reserved for those specially invited. This pattern shows how the social order of a Sumenep celebration places invited guests and the general audience in different positions, and it underlines that the presence of researchers in a traditional performance space is never neutral but is shaped by local etiquette and hierarchy.

The performers and the Rukun Perawas group

Over refreshments the researchers began talking with Zainal, one of the Rukun Perawas performers due to appear that night, who specialises in female characters. In a single performance Zainal may play more than one character, distinguishing them by changing masks and costumes (Zainal, personal communication, 12 June 2024). Performers change their own costumes, masks, and other stage equipment, a routine Zainal has followed for years (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Performers preparing backstage before the performance.
Documentation by the research team, Semaan Village, Sumenep, 12 June 2024.

According to Zainal, he was given female roles because his fellow performers considered him flexible; in daily life, however, he identifies as a man and behaves and dresses accordingly. Cross-gender casting of this kind is common in the masked puppeteer traditions of East Java, including the Malangan mask theatre (Kusmayati, 2002), and shows that performers consciously maintain the boundary between stage role and everyday identity.

Cross-gender conventions

The portrayal of female characters by male actors in Topeng Dheleng follows a pattern found across the Panji-based masked puppeteer traditions of Java (Kusmayati, 2002), in which all actors, including those in the central female roles, have historically been men, a convention often linked to the historical staging of such performances in spaces identified as male domains. What is notable in the field data is that the performers do not regard the convention as suspending everyday gender identity. They treat it as a technical skill of performance, a matter of flexibility, kept strictly apart from Zainal's identity as a man off stage.

The convention should therefore not be read merely as a question of a performer's personal identity. Within the framework of cultural performance it is better understood as part of a

collectively agreed iconography of character, in which the mask, the puppeteer's voice, and the costume together constitute the character, while the actor's body serves as a relatively neutral medium. This reading accords with Carlson's (1998) emphasis that cultural performances operate through a mutually recognised system of signs rather than through the individual expression of performers alone.

Performance structure: opening, core play, and closing

At about 21.00 WIB activity moved backstage. Cast and crew prepared themselves while gamelan was already playing at the front of the stage, and the puppeteer was ready in his stage clothes. As they smoked and dressed, the performers told the researchers the history of the Rukun Perawas group. The event began with songs sung from behind the still-closed stage while performers dressed and made up and the crew attended to technical matters. At about 22.00 WIB the bride and groom were seated side by side on stage, accompanied by songs sung by the puppeteer. Guests congratulated the couple by handing them money directly, without envelopes, and some gave money to the bride again and again (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Guests performing *nyawer*, giving money to the bride and groom on stage.
Documentation by the research team, Semaan Village, Sumenep, 12 June 2024.

Most of the money was in small denominations, such as Rp2,000 and Rp5,000; only a few guests gave Rp10,000 or more. Children accompanying the couple often received a share, and some visitors folded banknotes into necklaces. Givers were not limited to invited guests: anyone who wished could go up on stage to *nyawer* (to give money to those on stage), including vendors selling around the arena. The practice can be read as a mechanism of economic redistribution and an affirmation of solidarity between residents and the host family, a pattern common in life-cycle ceremonies across the agrarian societies of the archipelago.

Meanwhile, as they dressed, the performers were briefed on the story and on the roles they would play that night. The Rukun Perawas group keeps a collection of story outlines written neatly on the paper used to roll clove cigarettes, a form of documentation typical of folk arts that seldom possess a printed standard script (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Zainal making up for a female role.
Documentation by the research team, Semaan Village, Sumenep, 12 June 2024.

When the couple had returned to the wedding dais, the Topeng Dheleng proper began. It opened with a dance by young girls, a new creation unconnected to the main storyline (Zainal, personal communication, 13 June 2024), which lasted about 15 minutes and served as a welcome to the audience. Spectators could sit anywhere around the stage, with no area reserved for invited guests. The couple watched from the dais about 25 metres away, positioned at roughly 90 degrees to the stage front. The stage stood about 1 metre above the ground and measured 10 metres wide and 4 metres deep. The first scene began at 22.15 WIB. The story was a new fiction not drawn directly from the Mahabharata or Ramayana, although its costumes and movements still followed the conventions of *wayang*. It told of a disciple, himself a king, who betrays his teacher by stealing a book of magical teachings in order to use that magic to rule the world.

Dramaturgy: jejer, pathet, and the function of goro-goro

The story structure is typical of traditional theatre in the Javanese cultural sphere. The first scene is a *jejer*, an audience scene in the royal hall that introduces how the story will unfold and sets out the problem that drives the plot (Sumardjo, 1997). Events then move outside the kingdom, on the road and at a *padepokan* (hermitage), before returning to the palace, punctuated by battle scenes at several levels, from the *perang gagal* (inconclusive battle) to the *perang brubuh* (final battle) near the end. In the middle comes a comic interlude comparable to the *goro-goro* of Wayang Purwa (Sumardjo, 1997); although less strictly than Wayang Purwa, the story structure of Topeng Dheleng still broadly follows the *pathet* (tonal and temporal division) system (Ahmad Darus, personal communication, 12 June 2024). The final scene concludes the story. At scenes they found appealing, spectators threw money or cigarettes onto the stage. *Saweran* (the money given) peaked when the princess played by Zainal appeared and during the comic scenes, an indication of the emotional closeness between the audience and the performers (Kayam, 1999).

In Wayang Purwa dramaturgy, the *pathet* system usually divides the night into three emotional registers: calm and formal at the outset, rising to conflict and tension in the middle, and resolving at the end (Sumardjo, 1997). Although Topeng Dheleng does not apply the *pathet* system as strictly as *wayang* (Teguh, 2017), a similar tendency appears in the field data. The performance opened with a quiet, ceremonious *jejer* in the royal hall, escalated through progressively intense conflict and battle scenes from *perang gagal* to *perang brubuh*, and subsided in the closing scene (Dwija Badranaya & Sedana, 2021). The *goro-goro* in the middle serves two purposes: it offers an emotional pause that relieves dramatic tension, and it opens a space for social commentary in which performers respond to current local affairs (Sumardjo,

1997). This double function explains why the comic scenes, like the appearance of the female lead, were the high points of audience participation through *saweran*: both touch the audience's emotions most directly, through laughter and through admiration.

Mask symbolism in the Javanese–Madurese tradition

Although this study did not inventory the colours and motifs of each Rukun Perawas mask, characterisation through masks in Topeng Dheleng should be placed within the general conventions of masked puppeteer theatre in Java and Madura. In these traditions the colour and shape of a mask mark character: red masks generally denote a hard or coarse disposition, while white or soft-coloured masks denote a refined and reflective one (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996; Sumardjo, 1986). Such conventions let the audience recognise a character even when all dialogue is voiced by the puppeteer, as in Topeng Dheleng, where mask and costume, rather than the concealed face of the actor, are the principal markers of identity on stage. A detailed study of the colour typology, carving motifs, and philosophy of the Rukun Perawas masks, of the kind Kusmayati (2002) undertook for the Malangan mask, would show how far the Sumenep typology follows or departs from these conventions.

Vocal and masking technique

As its name implies, Topeng Dheleng assigns every voice, male and female, to the puppeteer. Synchronising the movements of masked actors with the puppeteer's voice demands particular technique and constant practice. Before voicing a character, the puppeteer usually names the character about to speak (Ahmad Darus, personal communication, 12 June 2024), so that the actor knows when to mime speaking and when to remain still. This mechanism makes the puppeteer both the centre of dramaturgical control and the single voice that unites all characters on stage, a position structurally resembling that of the *dhalang* in Wayang Purwa, except that here it is paired with the visible bodies of actors. Performers must also accustom themselves to severely restricted vision, since the eye holes of a mask are no more than 1 centimetre across at their widest. The restriction makes fast and forceful movement difficult, and battle scenes in particular require long habituation to the mask (Ahmad, personal communication, 13 June 2024).

Setting, properties, and stage technology

Topeng Dheleng uses relatively few settings and properties. Most locations are represented by painted backdrops known as *tonil*, whose attention to perspective makes them appear lifelike at first glance (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996; Sumardjo, 1986), depicting palaces, rice fields, houses, forests, and other scenes. Tables, chairs, and other properties are still used in some scenes. Besides *tonil*, the Rukun Perawas group employs several technologies. At the opening, a projector connected to a laptop displayed the names of the cast, the director, and other information. The group lights its performances with dimmer-controlled parabolic lamps using light-emitting diodes (LED), which are energy-efficient and can cycle through colour combinations. Firecrackers and simple metal-sheet devices supply sound effects in some scenes, and on occasion effects are produced vocally through microphones using beatbox technique. Such technology shows that Topeng Dheleng is not fixed in an old *pakem* (canonical convention) but actively absorbs new elements without abandoning its ritual structure, a finding that nuances Wibowo's (2022) report that the public regards the genre as a static, antiquated art.

Performance economy and the resilience of a coastal community

Performers are paid according to role and responsibility. A puppeteer may receive up to 2,000,000 Indonesian rupiah (IDR) per night; female leads, always played by men, earn around IDR 500,000 to 1,000,000; other performers generally earn IDR 150,000 to 250,000; and support crew receive about IDR 150,000. A group such as Rukun Perawas may perform up to ten times

a month, and a puppeteer or lead performer may also be engaged by other groups (Zainal, personal communication, 13 June 2024). This honorarium structure reveals a fairly strict hierarchy of expertise, with the puppeteer at its apex as holder of dramaturgical and vocal control, and it shows that Topeng Dheleng operates as a unit of the creative economy supporting performers alongside their main livelihoods in fishing and farming.

The economy of performance must be read against the socio-economic character of Semaan, which depends on farming and the sea. Up to ten performances a month means that Topeng Dheleng is not a seasonal practice but a fairly regular source of supplementary income. Such dual livelihoods, combining work in the primary sector with active involvement in traditional arts, are a common resilience strategy in coastal communities, where fishing and planting seasons seldom provide stable income throughout the year. At the same time, *nyawer* acts as redistribution at the community level. Money given to the bride and, at certain moments, to performers carries symbolic meaning as a blessing and also provides direct income for the host family and the troupe. Topeng Dheleng thus occupies a dual position in Sumenep's economic life: it is a cultural institution with ritual and religious functions, and it is a node of the creative economy linking formal honoraria, paid by the host to the troupe, with informal redistribution from the audience to the couple and the performers through *saweran*. The two channels together sustain troupes such as Rukun Perawas despite limited formal institutional support for folk arts of this kind.

Reading the performance as a cultural performance

Following Singer as discussed by Carlson (1998, p. 14) and Murgiyanto (2018, pp. 18–27), a cultural performance is recognisable by clear boundaries: a beginning and an end, an organised programme, a trained set of performers, and an audience consciously present to witness it. The Semaan performance fulfils all of these. It had a clear time frame within the customary span of 21.00 to 04.00 WIB, a structured programme of opening, main play, and Rokat Pandhaba, performers divided by role and specialisation into puppeteer, lead actors, supporting actors, and crew, and an audience that participated actively through *nyawer*.

The field data show that Topeng Dheleng transmits not only the stories of Panji, the Mahabharata, or the Ramayana as texts but also the social values of the Sumenep community. The convention of giving money to the bride emphasises mutual assistance and economic solidarity among residents across the life cycle, while the cross-gender convention of Zainal's role indicates a measure of tolerance for gender flexibility on the traditional stage, even as the everyday identity of the actor as a man is strictly maintained. Both are what Murgiyanto (2018, p. 18) describes as content "neatly wrapped" in performance, legible only through direct observation of the event rather than through a script. Stage technology, from projectors and LED lighting to artificial sound effects, should likewise be read as a negotiation between tradition and the times. Murgiyanto (2018) stresses that cultural performances are not frozen artefacts but living arenas in which communities continually renegotiate forms of presentation without sacrificing core ritual structure. In Topeng Dheleng, the adoption of technology changes neither the three-stage structure nor the single-voice convention; it enriches only the sensory layer of the performance. This qualifies Wibowo's (2022) conclusion that the public regards Topeng Dheleng as antiquated and stagnant: at the level of the troupe, there is an active effort to remain relevant without relinquishing ritual identity.

Audience participation and shared performance space

A further characteristic of cultural performance is the active involvement of the audience rather than passive observation (Schechner, 2006). The field data show a high degree of participation through two mechanisms: giving money to the bride and groom throughout the performance, and the freedom to sit anywhere around the stage without formal partitions between groups of spectators, apart from the refreshments reserved for invited guests.

Together these make the boundary between performers and spectators fluid, since anyone present might go up on stage to *nyawer*, as the vendors around the arena did.

This degree of participation means that Topeng Dheleng cannot be fully understood through the model of proscenium theatre, which separates stage and auditorium. Its stage, roughly one metre high and without rigid barriers, allows temporary exchanges of position between spectators and active participants. The spatial pattern accords with the general character of folk performance in the archipelago, where the line between performer and audience is looser than in modern proscenium theatre, and it reinforces the function of performance as a communal event rather than a spectacle consumed passively.

Topeng Dheleng as a Ritual Performance

The final part of the performance consists of the obligatory Bathara Kala play and the core rites of the Rokat Pandhaba: purification, redemption through payment of the *ijab khobul*, and the Pabelian Sape (Chair, 2020). These rites are inseparable from the play, the two forming a single event that runs from evening until early morning. The structure confirms that Topeng Dheleng is not an entertainment that happens to coincide with a rite but the rite itself presented in theatrical form.

The symbolic structure of the Rokat Pandhaba

The three elements of the Rokat Pandhaba can be read as a symbolic sequence moving from self-purification to the restoration of cosmological relations. Purification places the subject of the *rokat* in a condition cleansed of misfortune before the next stage. Redemption through payment of the *ijab khobul* can be understood as a symbolic affirmation of a pact between human beings and a force believed to threaten their safety, consistent with the general meaning of *rokat* as a ceremony for warding off misfortune (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996). The Pabelian Sape, literally connected with the cow in Madurese ritual tradition, forms the symbolic peak of the whole Rokat Pandhaba (Chair, 2020). Read through Turner's (1982) account of transitional rites, the three stages display the familiar pattern of separation from a former condition through purification, a liminal period of redemption and status negotiation, and incorporation into a new condition considered safe. This study did not, however, observe the technical details of the Pabelian Sape and the redemption rite separately, since fieldwork focused on the performance as a whole; in-depth interviews with customary and local religious leaders familiar with the philosophy of the Rokat Pandhaba would considerably extend this reading.

Rokat as a rite of passage

Following Turner's (1982, p. 25) distinction, the *rokat* accompanying the Semaan performance is primarily a rite of passage, since it is held for a wedding, a change of social status that the couple undergo once in a lifetime. Seated side by side on stage, accompanied by the puppeteer's songs and the guests' *nyawer*, the bride and groom are liminal subjects moving from one status, unmarried, to another, married. The Rokat Pandhaba at the close of the performance, with its purification and redemption, affirms the success of this transition and petitions that the new household be spared misfortune (*mowang denit*).

Yet Topeng Dheleng is not simply a rite of passage. Across the community, *rokat* through Topeng Dheleng is repeated from celebration to celebration throughout the year; Rukun Perawas alone may perform up to ten times a month. This repetition gives the genre a calendrical character at the level of Sumenep society, even though for each host family the event remains a once-in-a-lifetime transition. Topeng Dheleng therefore occupies a fluid position between Turner's two categories: a rite of passage for those who undergo *rokat*, and something close to a calendrical rite for the Sumenep community as a collectivity that routinely re-enacts the same ritual structure.

This fluidity is not a conceptual weakness; it demonstrates the flexibility of Turner's framework when applied to complex field data. A rite experienced once by an individual can be structurally repeated at the level of society without either disposition cancelling the other. A similar pattern appears in other life-crisis rites in the archipelago, such as *ruwatan*, which a child deemed ritually endangered undergoes once but which puppeteers and their communities hold again and again across generations. Topeng Dheleng thus works as a ritual institution on two scales at once: the personal scale of the host family and the collective scale of a community that continually reproduces the same ritual structure through troupes such as Rukun Perawas.

Ritual efficacy and theatrical efficacy

Schechner's (2006) efficacy–entertainment continuum illuminates a productive tension in Topeng Dheleng. On the one hand, the performance must be ritually efficacious: the Rokat Pandhaba is believed to dispel the bad luck and calamity that threaten the bride and her family (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996). On the other, entertainment is prominent throughout, from the newly created opening dance and the comic *goro-goro* to the *saweran* that drew laughter and cheers when the princess played by Zainal came on stage. Audience participation, in money and cigarettes, peaked precisely in the most entertaining scenes, which suggests that success as entertainment supports rather than diminishes the legitimacy of the ritual in the eyes of the community.

The changing intensity of participation over the night confirms this. In the more ceremonious opening sections, such as the seating of the couple and the puppeteer's prologue, the audience was orderly and solemn, in keeping with the formal atmosphere. In the middle, with its comic scenes and the appearance of the princess, participation rose sharply in *saweran*, laughter, and cheering. The audience evidently understands and responds to the alternation between more sacred and more profane registers within a single performance without perceiving them as contradictory. Topeng Dheleng therefore cannot be placed exclusively at either pole of the continuum. It exemplifies Schechner's argument, as cited in Murgiyanto (2018, pp. 52–56), that ritual and theatre presuppose each other: a performance that succeeds theatrically in entertaining is one that its community considers ritually legitimate and beneficial.

Liminality and communitas

Turner's (1982) concepts of liminality and *communitas* also explain the social dynamics of the performance. The space around the stage, open to anyone without reserved seating, creates *communitas*, a temporary state in which the barriers of everyday status soften. *Nyawer*, practised by invited guests and nearby vendors alike, shows the stage momentarily becoming a common space that transcends the economic and social divisions of its audience. At the same time, the refreshments reserved for invited guests, the researchers included, show that this *communitas* is partial and temporary: it governs interaction around the stage without erasing the social structures that prevail outside the liminal moment.

The most prominent liminal moment came when the bride and groom were seated together on stage at the opening, accompanied by the puppeteer's songs and witnessed by everyone present regardless of status. Here the couple were in what Turner (1982) calls a state *betwixt and between*, no longer single yet not fully married, while all present took part in the transition through *nyawer*. That liminal position is fully resolved only when the Rokat Pandhaba ends in the early hours, a sign that the couple's change of status and the *rokat* rite run on the same timeline and affirm each other.

Comparison with Other Panji-Based Mask Traditions

Compared with the Panji-based masked puppeteer traditions of other regions, such as Topeng Malang, Topeng Cirebon, and the mask traditions of Klaten and Yogyakarta, Topeng Dheleng

differs in two fundamental respects. The first concerns repertoire. Whereas those traditions consistently draw on the Panji cycle (Bandem & Murgianto, 1996; Kusmayati, 2002), Topeng Dheleng performs mainly Mahabharata and Ramayana plays and only occasionally the local Panji story of Raden Wijaya Kusuma from Polo Salaka (Darus, 2014). The second, more significant for this study, concerns the intensity of ritual content. Where masked puppeteer theatre elsewhere has tended to become profane performance oriented to entertainment and tourism (Timoer, 1979), Topeng Dheleng retains the Rokat Pandhaba as an obligatory closing that cannot be detached from the performance.

Larasati's (1991) findings on Topeng Dhalang in Marengan, which lies in the same regency as Semaan, indicate that the symbolic and ritual functions of the genre are generally more prominent in Sumenep than in mainland East Java. The ritual character observed in Rukun Perawas is therefore probably not an isolated case but related to the cultural character of the Sumenep islands, which historically stood further from the centres of power and modernisation in mainland East Java than did Malang or Cirebon, and whose geography has allowed ritual traditions to persist without the same pressure for change. Topeng Dheleng accordingly holds a distinctive place among the Panji-based mask traditions of Java and Madura as one of the few variants whose ritual function remains intact rather than having been transformed into a spectacle commodity.

The comparison must also take socio-economic context into account. Topeng Malang, Topeng Cirebon, and the Klaten tradition developed in areas that met tourism and the urban creative industries earlier, and so faced greater pressure to become compact, commercial spectacles. Sumenep, with an agrarian and maritime economy relatively untouched by large-scale tourism, provides conditions in which Topeng Dheleng can sustain a full all-night performance, including its *rokat* structure, without significant pressure to condense. The survival of its ritual dimension depends not only on the internal strength of the art form but also on Sumenep's position in the economic and cultural geography of East Java and Madura.

Toward an Integrated Reading of Ritual and Theatre

The findings demonstrate the value of an interdisciplinary approach combining theatre studies, the anthropology of art, and the study of local religious ritual. Dramaturgical analysis of *jejer*, *pathet*, and *goro-goro* cannot alone explain why Topeng Dheleng has survived without an analysis of its ritual function as *rokat*, rite of passage, and efficacious act. Conversely, ritual analysis that ignores dramaturgical quality risks overlooking how theatrical success, through *saweran*, laughter, and dramatic tension, supports the legitimacy of the ritual in the eyes of the public.

With respect to the first research question, Topeng Dheleng displays all the characteristics of cultural performance identified by Singer, Carlson, and Murgiyanto: a clear time frame, a three-stage programme, performers with defined specialisations and a hierarchy of honoraria, settings and technologies that are continually negotiated, and active audience participation through *nyawer*. Through these elements it transmits to its community the values of mutual assistance, conventions of gender representation on stage, and communal economic solidarity. With respect to the second, Topeng Dheleng shows ritual efficacy and theatrical efficacy operating simultaneously and supporting each other, as Schechner's continuum anticipates. The Rokat Pandhaba makes it a rite of passage for the couple while giving it a near-calendrical character for the community, and the fluid space between performers and audience creates a moment of *communitas* in Turner's sense, in which everyday social barriers soften as people witness and join a rite of warding off misfortune.

The two findings are inseparable. It is precisely because Topeng Dheleng succeeds as an entertaining and widely participatory cultural performance, and not in spite of it, that the public continues to trust it as a legitimate means of *rokat*; the appeal of the spectacle in turn

draws on public belief in the validity of its ritual function. This reciprocity carries a methodological implication for the study of traditional performing arts in Indonesia. Asking whether a performance is ritual or entertainment may be the wrong question for many of the archipelago's traditions; a more productive question is how both dimensions are constructed simultaneously through the same dramaturgical elements, from scene structure and the puppeteer's vocal technique to properties, technology, and patterns of audience participation.

Implications for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

That Topeng Dheleng retains its ritual structure while adapting to modern stage technology has consequences for its conservation. Wibowo (2022) reported that most people, and especially the young, view the genre as antiquated and prefer popular culture. At the level of the troupe, however, the genre continues to evolve: the newly created opening dance performed by young girls, for example, is Rukun Perawas's way of attracting younger audiences without altering the core of the performance. The gap between public perception and troupe practice suggests that safeguarding is less a matter of the authenticity of form than of the visibility of the genre and the direct involvement of young people in its practice.

Within the framework of intangible cultural heritage protection, the ritual dimension analysed above should be a principal consideration alongside the aesthetic one. Documentation confined to visual form, such as costumes, masks, and movements, without an understanding of the *rokat* risks reducing Topeng Dheleng to an aesthetic artefact detached from its socio-religious roots. Local government and the Sumenep culture office could begin with a comprehensive census of active troupes, recording membership, frequency of performance, and the regeneration of performers and puppeteers, since data on the distribution of troupes across Sumenep's districts remain very limited. Programmes might then include full documentation of the Rokat Pandhaba, the involvement of puppeteers and senior performers as resource persons for young learners, and the integration of Topeng Dheleng into the local-content curriculum of Sumenep schools. Arts education institutions could collaborate with troupes such as Rukun Perawas through residencies or dramaturgy workshops that connect traditional knowledge with systematic academic documentation. For the troupes themselves, their success in adopting stage technology without sacrificing ritual structure is an asset to be developed deliberately, for instance through high-quality video documentation of complete performances shared on a limited basis with educators and researchers, without diminishing the sacredness of the performance for host communities.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to determine what form Topeng Dheleng takes as a cultural performance and how it can be understood as a ritual performance. As a cultural performance, the Rukun Perawas performance in Semaan organises performers, story, and space into a three-stage event that integrates entertainment, in the form of a newly created dance, comic interludes, and *saweran*, with the ritual closure of the Rokat Pandhaba. Through that event it transmits values of mutual assistance, economic solidarity, and conventionalised cross-gender representation, and its adoption of modern stage technology reveals an adaptive capacity that leaves the core structure intact. As a ritual performance, it shows that ritual and theatrical efficacy cannot be separated: the *rokat* makes the event a rite of passage for the couple while giving it a near-calendrical character for the community, and the *communitas* formed around the stage becomes a space in which cultural values are transmitted and renewed across generations, whether through participation as performers and crew or as spectators who join in *saweran*.

Theoretically, the study shows that the concept of cultural performance associated with Singer and Carlson and the ritual performance frameworks of Turner and Schechner can be used

complementarily. The position of Topeng Dheleng between rites of passage and calendrical rites, and between the poles of efficacy and entertainment, suggests that these categories are better understood as spectra than as mutually exclusive boxes. The analysis offers a model for dramaturgical analysis in courses on performance analysis, theatre sociology, and ethnochoreography, and it supplies documentation that can help local government and cultural agencies formulate policies for protecting the intangible cultural heritage of Sumenep, where safeguarding must attend to ritual function as well as aesthetic form.

The study is limited by its reliance on a single performance in one village, by the observation of one night only, and by the researchers' outsider status, which excluded the ritual preparations preceding the performance. Comparative research across Sumenep's districts and across different occasions, such as *rokat* held without a wedding or performances at village purification ceremonies, would test how consistent the ritual structure identified here is, and in-depth study of the symbolic meaning of the Pabelian Sape and the redemption of the *ijab khobul* within the Rokat Pandhaba remains an open field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the Rukun Perawas group of Dasuk District, Sumenep, and in particular Ahmad Darus, Zainal, and Ahmad, for generously sharing their knowledge and time, and the host family in Semaan Village for welcoming the research team to their celebration.

DECLARATIONS

Funding. This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval and informed consent. No institutional ethical approval number is reported. Permission to observe, photograph, and record the performance was obtained from the host family and the leader of the Rukun Perawas group before the performance, and the informants named in the article took part in the interviews with knowledge of the research purpose.

REFERENCES

Adityatama, W., Hamidah, H., & Assoburu, S. (2024). Seni hadroh sebagai komunikasi budaya Islam (Studi pada Majelis Assolihin di Talang Kedondong Palembang). *Indonesian Culture and Religion Issues, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.47134/diksima.v1i1.2

Bandem, I. M., & Murgianto, S. (1996). *Teater daerah Indonesia*. Kanisius.

Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S. J. (1993). *Metode penelitian kualitatif dan kuantitatif.* Alfabeta.

Brandon, J. R. (2003). *Jejak-jejak seni pertunjukan di Asia Tenggara* (R. M. Soedarsono, Trans.). P4ST UPI.

Carlson, M. (1998). *Performance: A critical introduction*. Routledge.

Carlson, M., & Shafer, Y. (1990). *The play's the thing: An introduction to theatre*. Longman.

Chair, B. M. (2020). Dimensi kosmologis ritual rokat pandhaba pada masyarakat Madura. *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, dan Tradisi), 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.18784/smart.v6i1.952

Darus, A. (2014). Topeng dalang Madura sebagai media komunikasi untuk seni pertunjukan rakyat. In *Seminar Tokoh Panji Indonesia: Panji dalam berbagai tradisi Nusantara* (pp. 70–75).

Dwija Badranaya, I. N., & Sedana, I. N. (2021). Struktur dramatik wayang kulit parwa lakon Angsaliman oleh dalang I Dewa Made Rai Mesi. *Jurnal Damar Pedalangan, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.59997/dmr.v1i1.691

Endraswara, S. (2006). *Metode, teori, teknik penelitian kebudayaan: Ideologi, epistemologi, dan aplikasi*. Pustaka Widyatama.

Hanto, W. (1997). *Topeng dalang Madura dari seni keraton ke seni pertunjukan teater rakyat*.

Hartnoll, P. (1995). *The theatre: A concise history*. Thames and Hudson.

Jatuthasri, T. (2018). Inao of King Rama II: The transformation of the Panji stories into a masterpiece of Thai court drama literature. *SPAFA Journal, 2*. https://doi.org/10.26721/spafajournal.v2i0.576

Kayam, U. (1999). Nilai-nilai tradisi dan teater kontemporer kita. In T. F. Awuy (Ed.), *Teater Indonesia: Konsep, sejarah, problema*. Dewan Kesenian Jakarta.

Kusmayati, A. M. H. (2002). *Transmisi seni pertunjukan topeng dhalang Rukun Perawas di Madura*.

Larasati, D. (1991). *Fungsi dan nilai simbolis pertunjukan topeng dalang di Marengan Sumenep Madura*. Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta.

Li, L., & Phanlukthao, P. (2024). Taboos and cultural literacy education in ritual performance of Chizhou Nuo opera, China. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 12*(4). https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.12n.4p.133

Mardotillah, M., & Zein, D. M. (2017). Silat: Identitas budaya, pendidikan, seni bela diri, pemeliharaan kesehatan. *Jurnal Antropologi: Isu-Isu Sosial Budaya, 18*(2). https://doi.org/10.25077/jantro.v18.n2.p121-133.2016

Murgiyanto, S. (2018). *Pertunjukan budaya dan akal sehat* (D. Pramayoza, Ed.).

Pratama, R. J., & Hidayat, W. (2015). Penciptaan buku esai fotografi topeng dalang sebagai upaya melestarikan budaya tradisional Sumenep. *Jurnal Desain Komunikasi Visual, 4*(2).

Prihantini, P. (2017). Ritual rokat pandhaba dalam pertunjukan topeng dhalang "Rukun Pewaras" Slopeng: Kajian bentuk dan fungsi. *Terob, 8*(1).

Sahid, N. (2017). *Sosiologi teater: Teori dan penerapannya*. Gigih Pustaka Mandiri.

Schechner, R. (2006). *Performance studies: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Simatupang, L. (2013). *Pergelaran: Sebuah mozaik penelitian seni-budaya* (D. Pramayoza, Ed.). Jalasutra.

Soedarsono, R. M. (1985). *Peranan seni budaya dalam sejarah kehidupan manusia: Kontinuitas dan perubahannya* [Inaugural professorial address, Faculty of Letters]. Universitas Gadjah Mada.

Soelarto, B. (1978). *Topeng Madura (Topong)*. Proyek Pengembangan Media Kebudayaan, Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia.

Sumardjo, J. (1986). *Ikhtisar sejarah teater Barat*. Angkasa.

Sumardjo, J. (1997). *Perkembangan teater modern dan sastra drama Indonesia*. STSI Press.

Teguh, T. (2017). Ladrang Sobrang laras slendro patet nem. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan, 18*(2). https://doi.org/10.24821/resital.v18i2.2447

Timoer, S. (1979). *Topeng dhalang di Jawa Timur*. Proyek Sasana Budaya, Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.

Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. PAJ Publications.

Van Peursen, C. A. (1976). *Strategi kebudayaan* (D. Hartoko, Trans.). Kanisius.

Wibowo, S. (2022). Kesenian topeng dalang Sumenep tahun 2000–2010 (Nilai sejarah dan budaya terhadap perilaku moral masyarakat). *AVATARA: E-Journal Pendidikan Sejarah, 12*(1).

Wiyono, E. T., Adib, A., & S., A. W. (2013). Perancangan komunikasi visual revitalisasi tari topeng dalang untuk program destinasi Madura. *Jurnal Desain Komunikasi Visual Adiwarna, 1*(2).