

Laesan Traditional Arts: The Relationship of Natural Life with Human Behavior (Case Study in Lasem District, Rembang Regency)

Siti Nur Hasisa¹, and Muhammad Suryadi^{1*}

¹Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract. This study proposes to reveal the relationship between natural life and human behavior reflected in laesan. It used a qualitative descriptive approach with an ethnographic study of communication. The result achieved is that in Laesan art, humans and nature are both creatures created by God, so the relationship between the two is called a horizontal relationship. In addition to making good use of what is available in nature, humans are also required to preserve nature. Such a relationship is illustrated and expressed in the stages of the Laesan game and the use of natural materials as one of the components of the instrument in the Laesan performing arts. Laesan is a performing art in the form of a dance accompanied by beats and songs typical of Laesan. The songs sung in laesan contain good advice for humans, one of which is to regulate human life with nature. The musical instruments (*tetabuhan*) used are traditional musical instruments in the form of jun and roof which represent Javanese cultural values. This is a form of local wisdom that marks a good relationship between humans and nature.

1 Introduction

Communication patterns used by the laesan groups are closely related to the categories and functions of language. Their characteristics are reflected in the communication components, the choice of language used, the symbols displayed through body gestures, and intonation. These elements act as supports for understanding the act of communication in verbal language.

These patterns are seen when laesan traditional art is shown to the audience, especially when the *panembang* (singers) recite repeated verses, the laes (a person who become the main character in laesan performance) communicates with the audience, and the *pawang* (master) interacts with the laes. In addition, the pattern of communication can also be seen when laesan players or activists communicate with social groups where the traditional art takes place.

Laesan is a traditional Lasem folk show in the form of a dance accompanied by typical songs and musical instruments. Both only exist in laesan; there is no other art that uses these songs and music (Adi, 2015). In addition to combining vocal and instrumental art, laesan also

* Corresponding author: mssuryadi07@gmail.com

utilizes literature in the form of prose to complement its aesthetic aspects. This prose art form is sung by a singer accompanied by music from *jun* and *bumbungan* (bamboo stuff).

Laesan does not only demonstrate the dance skills of the dancers but also has a philosophy. In each stage of the dance, the mission is to convey good advice in living life. It displays the magical element of the master role. In addition, when the laes takes place, the master casts a spell and lights the incense fragrance astage the laes' cage and is in charge of controlling the laes' movements. The magical phenomenon is seen when the master takes the laes to change clothes with their hands tied in a cage and can dance like a woman when they get out of it. In normal human logic, one cannot change clothes in this condition. However, this can happen to laes. It is this magical element that makes some of the santri community oppose it, considering laesan a ritual that violates Islamic sharia law.

Laesan had been astage since the 1940s and is still growing today. In its development, laesan experienced ups and downs, especially in 1970-1986 when this typical Lasem art was rejected quite aggressively for the same reason: violating Islamic values. However, no matter how the rejection was voiced, in the end, laesan was still shown because of the struggle of the culturalists. They succeeded in explaining to the public that laesan does not contain elements of shirk (associating partners with God). On the opposite, laesan is a form of acculturation of Javanese and Islamic culture that needs to be maintained without compromising the essence of religious teachings (Adi, 2015). Public acceptance of laesan has been getting better since the mid-2000s. Skepticism and objections gradually disappear. Laesan is now known to the public not as an art that is ceremonial in nature or bringing in spirits, but purely as a performance which is a product of acculturation of Javanese culture and Islamic values. Laesan contains life advice interspersed with trance elements (interview).

Laesan is considered similar to *sintren* (Kusumastuti, 2006). The difference between the two lies in the composition of the players. *Sintren* is played by women, while laesan is played by men. In addition, some laesan performances have variations with the use of glasses and a touch of modern musical instruments that have been varied. Laesan performances in Lasem are not included in that "some"; the art group that plays it is still purely traditional in tone, starting from the attributes, songs, to musical instruments. They still maintain the natural features. Another difference between *sintren* and laesan lies in the communication event. In the opening song, for example, the *sintren* plays *Turun-Turun Sintren* song, while the laesan plays the song *Ella-Ello*.

Laesan has several stages. The first stage starts with the arrival of someone who will be the laes to the center of the field that has been surstaged by a circle of spectators. Then the incense smoke is lit and covered with chicken cages that have been covered with white *mori* cloth. A person who becomes laes is then tied up by his master and locked up. That's when *Ella-Ello* begins with the following lyrics.

[*Lailahaillallah muhammadurrasulullah*]

'There is no god but Allah, Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of Allah'

[*Pengerane nggawe laes*]

'The God who creates laes'

Ella-Ello song is a prayer for God to send the spirit (soul) of an angel into laes. The song is only one of many songs in laesan. All songs indicate the use of a different language compared to the everyday form. These phenomena make the writer interested in studying more about the communication patterns there.

Departing from the explanation above, this study aims to reveal 1) the patterns and forms of communication, and 2) shifts in other components. This study used ethnography of communication approach. As a basic assumption, the players involved and play a role in laesan are thought to give birth to a unique communication phenomenon. This study proposes to reveal the communication patterns that occur in the laesan performance which represents the culture of the Javanese Muslim population.

2 Literature Review

Ethnography of communication is related to the study of linguistic anthropology. However, it further develops the object of study and leads into the context of communication. According to Kuswarno (2008: 11), this study began with an expert named Hymes in 1964. It used to be a critic of language studies which was considered to be overly discussing the surface (physical) of language.

This study is considered as a derivative form of language ethnography. The term ethnography of communication was initiated by Hymes (1964), explaining that language can be said to live in communication; it is meaningless if it is not used to communicate.

There are several studies on traditional dances as *laesan* with hidden meanings. Deska (2016) conducted a research entitled "Sintren Art as Local Wisdom in Terms of Anton Banker's Metaphysics". The results point out that *sintren* can be called mystical dances because the performance process goes through the process of summoning spirits. The similarity with this study is that both analyze dances with mystical elements. Meanwhile, the different lies on study object and theory.

Arifiani (2020) conducted a study on *sintren*. The results point out that the traditional art has a local communication system connected in the structural presentation of communication elements into the acronym GEPNIKAS, namely genre, ends, participants, norms, instrumentalities, key, act sequences, and settings. *Sintren* has a mandate consisting of three types, namely *parikan*, *mantra*, and song lyrics. Meanwhile the actions on the communication aspect presented in this art are divided into two, namely (1) the communication behavior of the *sintren* player and the spirit of the angel embodied in worship, expectations, and requests, and (2) the behavior of *sintren* players and spectators that are applied in notifications, solicitations, requests, or statements.

Another research was conducted by Nurlelari et al. (2017) entitled "The Art of *Sintren* in Indramayu Regency in a Historical Perspective". The findings indicate that *sintren* grows in western Central Java, eastern West Java, and Indramayu. Over time, *sintren* underwent various changes and modifications to its performances and songs.

Both previous studies have significant differences with the current study. Studies by Arifiani (2020) and Nurlaela et al. (2017) examine *sintren*, while this study examines the performing arts of *laesan*.

3 Methodology

This research was a qualitative descriptive study utilizing ethnography of communication approach. Data collection techniques were observation, introspection, and interviews. The data used in this study were all utterances contained in the *laesan* show of Mr. Yon group in Soditan Village, Lasem Sub-district. Researchers used three techniques in analyzing the data, namely description, analysis, and interpretation.

4 Results and Discussion

The Javanese songs played in *laesan* are found containing various values, typically about human life and local wisdom. There are good advices for human from birth to death.

Laesan has five stages. Each shows players with certain roles who cannot replace each other. These players include a master, a *laes*, two accompanying dancers, two singers, and three musicians. Each participant positioned himself according to the show procedure.

These components describe the interaction in *laesan*. They refer to the form, content, and sequence of actions in a communication event (Hymes, 1972: 60). The five stages are 1)

kulonuwun, 2) *uculna bandan*, 3) *dolanan*, 4) *nambani*, and 5) *pamitan*. The following is a further explanation regarding the stages in the laesan show.

4.1 Kulonowun Stage

The *kulonuwun* stage becomes the opening stage in laesan. In this stage, the master begins to pray and lights incense as stage the setting. He is assisted by another player who prepares black clothes to be put in the cage as well. A rope to tie the laes is also provided. During this activity, the master is silent and does not make a sound. However, he looks like he is reciting a prayer by closing his eyes to reach solemnity in asking God. In this procession, mantras or prayers are read silently.

This first stage puts the master as the main actor. After he sprinkles incense smoke into the cage and closes it, then the assistant enters the area and ties laes' hands and puts him in the cage. As the musicians beat the strains of *jun* and *bumbung*, the singers begin to sing a song *Ella-Ello*. This indicates that the laesan show has started.

The song contains a prayer to God so that laesan runs perfectly. Previously, this song had the lyrics "*ella ello laillallah*". Then as stage the 90s the lyrics were changed to "*lailahailallah*". This phenomenon signifies a change in the way people say then and now. Javanese people in the past were not fluent in chanting Arabic sentences compared to them nowadays. However, the meaning is definitely still the same.

4.2 Uculna Bandan Stage

In the second stage, namely the *kurungan* (confinement), the song *Banda Nira* is played. Laes, who was previously put in a cage by the assistant, with his hands tied and wearing a dirty cloth, then comes out. He is ready to dance in a black dress since his hands have been untied. Laes waddles like a woman barefoot. The principle dancers then join and escort the laes in the arena with the master on guard nearby. All participants wear black clothes. This stage communicates to the audience that the laes position is played by a man who has a female spirit. It expresses a message to eliminate the greed for the world which causes damages to both humans and nature. Therefore, people are asked to pray to God Almighty.

4.3 Dolanan Stage

In the third stage, which contains the *dolanan* (playing) scene, several Javanese songs are sung according to laes' wishes. The songs include *Jaran Dawuk*, *Adol Gambir*, *Pencak Silat*, *Enca-Enci*, *Kembang Gedhang*, and *Kembang Turi*. In this stage, the principle dancers help the laes attract the desired audience to dance with. For example, if the played song is *Jaran Dawuk*, then the laes dances like a horse using a broom. Then, if the song *Pencak Silat* is sung, then the laes invites one of the audience to fight. These scenes demonstrate the interaction between the laes and the audience.

The songs above reveal that life in this world is just like playing (temporal). Therefore, humans are expected to do good deeds to the environment and others.

4.4 Nambani Stage

In the *nambani* (treatment) stage, the singers sing *Luruo Laesan*. The song is classified as a mantra. There is also an interaction between the laes and the audience. If anyone wants to join the laesan dance, then there will be a transfer process from the laesan to the audience, by the way the audience's ears are blown by the master until he gets to the trance.

Communicative behavior whose contents are in the form of statements from the song can grab attention and create focus for those who see the audience. The magical element is the transfer of energy from the laes to the spectators or substitutes.

In the previous stage—before laes does playing scene, some offerings containing flowers, golden bananas, and cigarettes have been prepared and placed on a tray. The offerings are finally brought by the laes who are still in a dancing position, before being given to the person he likes. If the audience is given flowers, then usually the flowers are brought home and given water in a glass for a night. On the next day, the water will be given to family, typically if there is a member who is sick. This reveals that in life, humans must experience pain which humans must be patient, accept, and sincere of. However, they must also try to treat or make efforts, even though they will eventually face death. In this stage, the laesan players emphasize that the audience are not allowed to suspect the magic in laesan.

4.5 Pamitan Stage

The *pamitan* (farewell) stage presents two songs, namely *Kembang Jamur* and *Lara Tangis*. This stage shows various communicative behaviors towards the audience through messages in the songs. Communicative action is in the form of advice to humans, emphasizing that all will eventually die and leave everything in the world. When facing death, humans are described as experiencing a critical period that is very torturous, painful, and full of difficulties. Furthermore, no one can help except God Almighty by considering the deeds. Therefore, good deeds to humans, animals, and plants are absolute requirement to ease death process.

If previously the laes dances with cheerful movements, then it changes in this final stage. The music is made false and the rhythm is slipped. Laes finally falls and wakes up, then falls down again and cries. This scene marks the end of the laesan show.

Based on the act sequences performed between players in laesan, a one-way communication pattern is formed. This pattern eliminates the addressee or individual who is invited to speak to explain, justify, answer, express opinions to an instruction, questions, and information said by the speaker. The communication pattern describes the addressee's compliance with the speaker. The pattern of communication that is formed in laesan holds complete advice, which is a unity that cannot be separated. The advice is clearly illustrated through a series of every service process that cannot be reversed or eliminated. Both the dance movements and the song lyrics are very philosophical for the sustainability of human relations with the universe, typically with the God Almighty.

5 Conclusion

Laesan contains good advice for humans and nature. The relationship between the two is a horizontal because their positions are parallel since both are God's creatures. Humans are prohibited from being greedy by destroying nature or overexploiting. In addition, a message in laesan also warns humans to do good things to anyone, including the local environment and other creatures such as animals and plants by always remembering that they are always under God's supervision. These relationships are illustrated and expressed in the *dolanan* (playing) stage. Furthermore, the musical stuff which is created with natural elements such as clay and bamboo indicate the harmony between humans and nature. It represents Javanese cultural values and shows the local wisdom that is still preserved.

References

1. Adi, Pandu Galih. *Laesan, Kesenian Tradisi yang Mengawal Kebesaran Sejarah Lasem. Makalah Dipresentasikan di Festival Kesenian Lasem*, 2015. Print.
2. Arifiani, E. “Peristiwa Komunikasi dalam Kesenian Laesan di Kabupaten Pekalongan (Kajian Etnografi Komunikasi)” Tesis Undip Semarang, 2020.
3. Deska Aditama, Lutfhi. “Kesenian Sintren Sebagai Kearifan Lokal Ditinjau dari metafisika Anton Bakker”. *Jurnal Penelitian Humaniora*. 21.1 (2016): 57-72. Web 30 Des. 2021.
4. Hymes, D. “*Function of Speech: an Evolutionary Approach*. dalam *Fridrich C. Gruber, ed.*” *Anthropology and Education*, 1961: 55-83. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Web 2 Januari 2022
5. Kusumastuti, E. “Laesan Sebuah Fenomena Kesenian Pesisir: Kajian Interaksi Simbolik Antara Pemain dan Penonton.” *Harmonia Jurnal Pengetahuan dan Pemikiran Seni* 7.3 (2006):5-7. Web 3 Januari 2022.
6. Kuswarno, E. *Etnografi Komunikasi: Suatu Pengantar dan Contoh Penelitiannya*. Bandung: Widya Padjadjaran, 2008. Print.
7. Saville-Troike, M. *Ethnography of Communication: an Introduction*. New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003. Web 10 Feb. 2022.