

***Merti Desa* Tradition As The Local Wisdom of The Java Community In Indonesia**

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ABSTRACT

Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village is an area in Central Java, precisely in Kaliwungu District, Semarang Regency. People in this region continue to preserve traditions, one of which is the *Merti Desa* tradition. This research was conducted to determine (1) the meaning of the *Merti Desa* tradition (*uborampe*, art performance) for the residents of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village; (2) the differences between the *Merti Desa* and the other traditions intended to pray for the ancestors in the same area, and their comparison with other regions; (3) the community's efforts in maintaining the *Merti Desa* tradition. This study employed a qualitative method involving a phenomenology approach. It focused on community activities in carrying out a tradition. The data were collected through journals, news articles, field observations, and interviews. The findings indicated that the people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village preserved the *Merti Desa* tradition as local wisdom aimed to express public gratitude to God Almighty. Besides, several other traditions were also being preserved, including the *Nyadran*, to express gratitude and pray for the ancestors. The implementation of the *Merti Desa* tradition contained many values or meanings in each of its stages.

Keywords: *Tradition, Merti Desa, Local Wisdom, Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, Culture, Wayang*

A. INTRODUCTION

Culture is people's habits. According to Koentjaraningrat, it is all activities or systems of ideas and the work of humans. In addition, Suprihatin et al, (2023) states that it is a set of symbols used by humans as behavioral guidelines and adaptation strategies. From these two arguments, it can be concluded that culture is the entire system of ideas, actions, symbols, and the work of humans used as behavioral guidelines in life. It has further become one of the local wisdom of the Javanese community.

Local wisdom means something related to the culture in people's lives (Saputra, Fauziah, & Suwandi, 2022). Referring to Trianingsih, Setiawan, & Saddhono, (2023), it is a variety of ways and practices developed and preserved by the community across generations. Local wisdom is one of the characteristics of society because it represents habits or identities in the form of traditions in a particular area (Pradita et al, 2019).

Traditions are habits maintained by society over generations as a legacy from the ancestors that should not be lost (. In this regard, the Javanese people preserve varied traditions, one of which is the *Merti Desa*, which even spreads outside the Javanese community.

The *Merti Desa* tradition in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, Kaliwungu District, Semarang Regency, Central Java, is held once a year in conjunction with the commemoration of Indonesian Independence Day as an expression of gratitude to God Almighty. In addition, it aims to strengthen the friendship, cooperation, kinship, and togetherness of the local community, who may not be able to meet or greet each other daily.

In its implementation, several meaningful stages are usually carried out by the people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village. This tradition, typical to the Javanese people, especially Central Java, is delightful because an art performance, such as the shadow puppet show, must accompany the occasion. It is undoubtedly meaningful and becomes a representation of the local community.

Several scholars have studied the topic of the *Merti Desa* tradition, one of which was (Saddhono, Setiawan, & Setyawan, 2022). He states that the *Merti Desa* is one of the traditional ceremonies in Javanese society. It contains a feast (*selametan*) involving the entire community, led by the local government in a village. This ceremony is arranged to invite people to preserve the traditions of their ancestral heritage and take the provided lessons and values.

Preserving a tradition is crucial and must be done to appreciate the ancestors who have worked hard for a long time to maintain it. In this global era, it is effortless to fade a tradition if people do not want to hold it. Many outsiders undeniably love the traditions and culture in a

specific area, even though they do not understand the meaning of those activities (Juniarti, Saddhono, & Wibowo, 2019).

Therefore, the community must maintain its traditions, which in this context have become characteristics of Javanese society, and not let outsiders claim them as the society prefers foreign cultures. Moreover, cultural values and traditions must be upheld since they are the local wisdom that must always be kept.

A study on the *Merti Desa* is required to show an attitude of loving culture and tradition. It is critical for the community to get many benefits from it. Hence, this research was expected to provide more knowledge on Javanese culture, local wisdom, and tradition and explore the *Merti Desa* tradition and its meaning. In addition, researchers also attempted to examine the *uborampe* and its purpose. The art performances in the *Merti Desa* tradition were also worthy of in-depth analysis, as well as the difference between this type of tradition and the others in the same area, with a similar goal of praying for the ancestors. Besides, researchers also compared the *Merti Desa* tradition in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, with other regions.

B. METHOD

Method is a way to understand or analyze something. According to Subroto (1996), it is the whole step taken since someone formulates a frame of mind about language. In research, it is known as a method, tool, or strategy for conducting a study to obtain the expected results. Thus, the selection of a method is critical.

The present study employed a qualitative method focusing on in-depth observations. In this regard, researchers considered it could facilitate an overview of the investigated phenomenon. The results were descriptive data collected through journals, news articles, field observations, and interviews. The qualitative method can be divided into several types. The one used in this research was phenomenology, as it was considered suitable for the focus of the study, namely community activities in carrying out the tradition of *Merti Desa*. Furthermore, researchers also attempted to explore the values and compare them with other similar traditions.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Merti Desa is one of many traditions in Central Java. It is essentially an expression of gratitude to God Almighty for His blessings, such as health, safety, and peace. Moreover, it aims to strengthen friendship, cooperation, and a sense of kinship and togetherness among

residents. This ceremony can also invite people to preserve Javanese culture and work together to achieve their goals.

Local wisdom means the activities, practices, and manners being passed down across generations in a region. In Indonesia, particularly in Java, there is a variety of local wisdom that people might not know. Tradition, art, and buildings are some examples of it. Therefore, the *Merti Desa* tradition is included in local wisdom, especially in the Javanese community in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village.

Aside from being an expression of gratitude, the *Merti Desa* also embodies harmony with nature, as it is inseparable from human life. People take advantage of nature to meet their daily needs. Thus, human needs nature, as well as nature needs them. In essence, the two are complementary and cannot be separated.

There are several meaningful stages carried out by the community in the *Merti Desa* tradition. In this context, stages are procedures for the sequence of events in an activity. Different regions undoubtedly have distinct implementations. The stages of *Merti Desa* in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, were as follows:

1. Community Service

The first stage of *Merti Desa* was community service activity. It was usually in the form of cooperation to clean up the surrounding environment, such as roads or alleys, patrol posts, and tree branches. In addition, residents also cleaned tombs believed to be sacred, especially the graves of ancestors or figures known as their role models. This stage was intended to overcome obstacles or difficulties to provide all community members with a peaceful life.

2. *Kenduri (Slametan)*

The second stage was a traditional ceremony known as a feast or *kenduri/slametan*. It was done by bringing *tumpeng* (cone-shaped rice dish), *ingkung* (whole chicken, legs and neck tied), *nasi ambeng* (round-shaped rice), bananas, *wajik* (glutinous rice cooked with brown sugar), *jadah* (glutinous rice), plates, and *tape* (fermented cassava). The *ingkung* and *tumpeng* were only provided by the host at the art performance venue at the end of the event. These activities reflected the gratitude to God Almighty for the welfare and health given to the people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village.

3. Art Performance

The last stage of the *Merti Desa* tradition was the art performance. It was usually in the form of a shadow puppet show with the storyline of "*Makukuhani*", "*Sri Mulih*", or "*Sri Boyong*", the legend of *Dewi Sri* as a symbol of prosperity. Before the show was performed, people would initially serve the offerings (the things offered as a religious sacrifice or token of devotion) such as corn, rice, and coconut placed next to the *kelir* (white cloth installed as the background for the shadow puppet show).

The above descriptions illustrated the stages of the *Merti Desa* tradition conducted by the people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village. A shadow puppet show in the form of a *wayang kulit* performance always completed this tradition due to its meaning or philosophy. *Wayang* is a shadow or picture of human life from the womb until death. It also symbolizes human desires or lusts, such as:

1. Anger: symbolized by the color red, indicating an irritable disposition and all desires that must be fulfilled. It demonstrates that everyone must have felt anger in life, which is identical to the color red, so it is depicted by a puppet character with a red face in the world of puppetry.
2. *Luammah*: symbolized by the color black, representing the need to eat and sleep. As long as humans are alive, they always eat and drink. It is considered a basic need because they will not be able to live and eventually die without eating and drinking.
3. *Supiyah*: symbolized by the color yellow, demonstrating sexual concerns. It emerges when someone has reached adulthood, as a married person usually owns it.
4. *Mutmainah*: symbolized by the color white, reflecting the best lust. It encourages a person to do good deeds sincerely.

Many people do not understand the meaning of a puppet show. In this context, lust is symbolized by one of the puppets whose roles are always life-death-life-death. It is because human desires will never completely disappear. Hence, studying *wayang* will never meet a dead end, considering it can portray human life.

Understanding the history of *wayang* is fascinating, but the significance of *uborampe* as the basis for the puppet show must not be neglected. The meaning of *uborampe* in the *Merti Desa* tradition can be described as follows:

1. *Tumpeng*
It consists of two kinds, namely *tumpeng lanang* as a symbol of the Supreme Being, and *tumpeng wadon* as a symbol of respect for ancestors, which is smaller in size. *Tumpeng* is made of rice shaped like a mountain to symbolize life, illustrating that people must keep trying to be successful.
2. Banana
It represents hope for glory in life.
3. Market snacks
It reflects a blessing expected for the community.
4. *Rengginang*
This food is made of glutinous rice that coincides with each other, thereby portraying the meaning of a union.
5. *Tape*
It implies that man must be clean physically and mentally and be able to keep their anger to have a peaceful life. It is associated with the process of making a *tape*, which must also be done with a pure heart, preventing oneself from saying bad things to get a good result.
6. *Jadah* and *Wajik*
They symbolize hope for people to stick together or have close relationships between families.
7. Plate
It suggests that humans must go through the straight and right path in life, as what their religion teaches them.
8. *Inkung*
It illustrates humans when they are babies and is a symbol of surrender to the God Almighty, as represented by its shape of a whole chicken with its legs and neck tied.
9. *Nasi Ambengan*
It is a moon-shaped rice intended to express gratitude to God Almighty.
10. Rice
As the saying goes, "containing rice will be ducking," implying that more knowledge should make humans more helpful to others instead of becoming arrogant.
11. Corn

It symbolizes people who do not know many things when they are young. Corn is planted and covered with soil, just like humans; the piles of soil reflect problems in life.

12. Coconut

A young coconut is used to reflect determination, suggesting that humans must have strong perseverance in carrying out things in life.

A tradition is undoubtedly meaningful for the community. Likewise, the practice, art performance, and the *uborampe* have specific meanings and values. People decide to maintain a tradition not only because it is hereditary but because they notice the meaning being reflected. In this context, the main benefit of the *Merti Desa* tradition was to enhance the concern, kinship, and participation of community members in preserving their culture. Meanwhile, the other advantages were as follows:

1. As a medium to introduce various traditions or cultures with a profound meaning. Javanese people must be familiar with the tradition; thereby, loving and participating in introducing a culture to outsiders is critical and deserves to be supported.
2. To increase a sense of love for traditions or culture in their own country and prevent them from forgetting their identity as Indonesian citizens. It suggests that people must maintain their traditions anywhere and anytime because no matter how far they go, they are still part of the Javanese community and must not forget their identity.
3. As a means of cultural promotion for the community. Art is one form of culture closely related to Javanese society, so it must be preserved and introduced to outsiders to prevent anyone from claiming it to be theirs one day.

Introducing a tradition or culture is not as easy as one might imagine, particularly in making people love it. When people love their own culture, there will be no foreign customs that can replace it. However, a tradition cannot be separated from the influence of globalization, making it somehow compete with foreign or western cultures, which are often misunderstood by the community. Many people, particularly millennials, know or like foreign cultures more than their own because they are assumed to be more modern than the regional ones, which are considered ancient and outdated.

In rural areas, the traditions are supposed to be similar, especially the *Merti Desa* tradition. Nevertheless, there might still be a few differences in each region. In Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, the *Merti Desa* consisted of three stages: cleaning the surrounding

environment, a feast/*selamatan*, and an art performance. However, it was carried out differently, specifically on September 1, 2021, in which there was no shadow puppet show being performed. This distinction was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. People must conduct their activities briefly by considering the uncondusive situation. Thus, the *wayang* show was canceled to lower the crowd. It was replaced by a procession, in which the community went around the village carrying a pile of natural products. Additionally, the front row of the parade was accompanied by the *Reog* dance. Nonetheless, these changes did not affect the meaning of *Merti Desa* for the community, as they understood that the pandemic forced them to adapt. Hence, despite the limitations, the residents could still feel the essence of this tradition.

The Javanese community has many cultures representing their uniqueness. In addition to the *Merti Desa*, in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, there was another popular tradition called the *Nyadran*. It was quite the same as the *Merti Desa*. Both were conducted to express gratitude or to pray for the ancestors. The difference was that the *Nyadran* tradition had two stages, while the *Merti Desa* had three. The steps in the *Nyadran* were 1) the community cleaned up the environment around their residence and the tombs, and 2) the residents carried out a feast/*selamatan*. The *Nyadran* tradition was performed at the tomb by bringing food such as *tumpeng*, *ingkung*, side dishes, fruits, market snacks, and others according to the community's wishes. The community used a special container known as *tenong* (a food container made of bamboo) to bring the food.

The procedures of *Nyadran* tradition at the *kenduren* stage were the reading of *dhikr* and *tahlil*, a welcome speech from the village chief, and having meals together by initially cutting the cone and the chicken prepared. One day before the ceremony, people delivered *tumpeng* or food to distant relatives as a thanksgiving. It used to represent the same thing as the *Merti Desa* tradition, the expression of people's gratitude to God Almighty. Another difference between the traditions of *Merti Desa* and *Nyadran* was the implementation time. The *Merti Desa* was carried out once a year and in conjunction with the independence day of the Republic of Indonesia. In contrast, the *Nyadran* was conducted twice a year, namely in the months of *Mulud* and *Ruwah*.

The values contained in the *Nyadran* tradition were almost the same as the *Merti Desa*. They were described as follows:

1. The value of cooperation. It could be recognized as the implementation from the beginning to the end was carried out together by the community. It began with cleaning or *besik* (Javanese language; to clean) and ended with eating together at the tombs.
2. The value of unity and integrity. It was reflected when the communities ate together at the tomb and the houses, even though not all people held open houses or received guests at their homes.
3. The value of deliberation. It was shown that before the occasion, all people were engaged in public decision-making or deliberation to determine the systematics and location for the *Nyadran* ceremony if it could not be held at the tombs.
4. The value of social control. In the *Nyadran* tradition, the community gave a speech and expressed gratitude to God Almighty. They were grateful that, by doing the ceremony, they could maintain their ancestral traditions.
5. The value of local wisdom. It was represented by exchanging food between residents.

From the perspective of Islam, the existence of a tradition or culture cannot be separated from Qur'an, Hadith, and *Sunnah* as guidelines. In this context, the Javanese society, closely related to tradition, is still guided by religion. Even though it is often challenging to integrate with religion, people still carry out the traditions passed down across generations. People assume that tradition is a legacy being passed down over generations. Meanwhile, religion is a way of life from God Almighty. Thus, both can still be carried out without changing the norms or crossing the existing boundaries.

Efforts must be made by the people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, to maintain their traditions. It could be done by carrying out the tradition so that it would not disappear over time. Fostering a sense of love for tradition and providing understanding to the younger generation must also be done because when they already love and know the meaning, they will contribute to the preservation attempts.

Efforts and goals must run in harmony. The two cannot be separated because they are complementary. In this regard, the objectives of the community to keep conducting the *Merti Desa* tradition were to (1) show an attitude of loving culture and tradition, (2) be more familiar with Javanese culture, traditions, and local wisdom, and (3) comprehend the value or meaning consisted in its implementation. The discussion about culture and tradition will never end, considering that Indonesia, especially the Javanese people, is closely related to those two entities. Each region has a variety of traditions but may still have similarities with the other

area. Likewise, the *Merti Desa* tradition was not held only in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, but also in other regions.

Javanese community must be familiar with the *Merti Desa* tradition. Regardless, researchers discovered that this custom was also performed in other areas outside Java. Prianto, Asha, and Jaya (2020) conducted a study in Village IV of the Menanti Tribe, Sindang Dataran District, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu. The *Merti Desa* tradition was performed similarly in this area, despite some differences in the process. In further detail, there were two stages in its implementation, including:

1. Preparation stage

This stage was essentially the same: the community and village administrators held a meeting to discuss the time and location of the ceremony. In the Village IV of the Menanti Tribe, the *Merti Desa* tradition was conducted in the month of *Muharram* or *Suro* in the Javanese calendar. Thus, the residents also called it the *Suroan* tradition. People were required to pay some money depending on their monthly income. Hence, the event was carried out using community contributions and village funds.

2. Implementation stage

There were several processions in the implementation stage, such as 1) *Tabligh Akbar*, a recitation held one day before the *Merti Desa* tradition; (2) Islamic competitions for children; (3) celebrations centered in the mosque and attended by all residents; (4) shadow puppet show.

In addition to Suruhan Hamlet and Village IV, the *Merti Desa* tradition was also conducted in the Gunung Kidul region. According to Kuswanto, Fatkhurrokhman, Anam, and Rahman (2021), the residents in Gunung Kidul called the *Merti Desa* by the *Rasulan* tradition. Nevertheless, it did not merely signify the activities associated with Islam.

A committee was formed to plan the event, time, and costs required for its implementation. The ceremony was held in Pulosari and Giri Sobo districts, as both places were part of the Gunung Kidul region. In Pulosari District, it could take days to carry out. It began with community services such as cleaning the environment, graves, rivers, and places of worship for *dhanyang* (Javanese; spirit). Meanwhile, in Giri Sobo District, elders in the area prepared offerings to be put at several places, including the village center, sacred places, places near water, village boundaries, and every intersection.

The event was conducted during the harvest season or when the residents harvested the rice for the first time. The offerings included yellow coconut leaf, *kembang setaman* (7 kinds of mixed flowers), glass, comb, water inside a *kendhi* (a clay water container), market snacks, rice, and bananas. They had some functions and meanings which, to some extent, were quite similar to the ones believed in the Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, Kaliwungu District, Semarang Regency, Central Java, and Village IV of the Menanti Tribe, Sindang Dataran District, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu.

4. Conclusion

The *Merti Desa* tradition in Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, was maintained because it did not conflict with existing norms and was meant to express the community's gratitude to God Almighty. The people of Suruhan Hamlet, Rogomulyo Village, invited youth and elders to preserve the *Merti Desa* tradition, reflecting togetherness in fostering harmony and kinship. There were several meanings in the stages of the *Merti Desa* tradition: (a) cleaning was intended to avoid bad things; (b) *kenduri/selamatan* was an expression of gratitude to God Almighty and sharing with others; (c) *wayang* performance was an embodiment of human life in the world.

The community chose *Wayang* due to its meanings, such as the representation of human lust depicted by the puppet characters being played. The lusts referred to included (1) Anger: symbolized by the color red, implying an irritable character and all desires that must be fulfilled; (2) *Luammah*: symbolized by the color black, representing the needs to eat and sleep; (3) *Supiyah*: symbolized by the color yellow, portraying the priorities toward sexual concerns; (4) *Mutmmainah*: symbolized by the color white, indicating the best lust. Efforts needed specific goals to establish harmony. In this regard, the local community continued to carry out the *Merti Desa* tradition with several objectives: (1) to show an attitude of loving culture and tradition; (2) to be more familiar with Javanese culture, traditions, and local wisdom; (3) to comprehend the value or meaning in the implementation of the *Merti Desa* tradition.

The obstacle experienced by society in this era was the inability to avoid the impacts of globalization, which appeared to fade the barriers or boundaries between countries. Consequently, some people began to forget the traditions that characterize Javanese society because they preferred foreign cultures they thought to be more modern and up-to-date.

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