

# Craft and Performance in Rural East Java

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The rich earth of the volcanic islands of Java and Madura has nurtured its people for millennia: Sundanese in western Java, Javanese in central and eastern Java, and Madurese on Madura Island and the northeastern coastal areas of Java. Agriculture directly supports nearly three-quarters of the more than 32 million inhabitants of East Java, a province that consists of the eastern third of Java, all of Madura and a few smaller islands. The vast majority of these rural villagers are landless farm workers or peasants with little land. They mostly cultivate rice but also grow cash crops including tobacco, cotton, sugarcane, nuts and various fruits.

For the last 300 years, the peoples of East Java have generally contrasted their way of life with that of the Javanese of Central Java, whose societies have been dominated by the kingdoms of Mataram. The influence of this imperial past can be seen in the distinctions Indonesians frequently draw between a courtly, refined style marked by politeness and indirection (*halus*) and a rural, earthy style marked by quick speech and frankness (*kasar*). The people living in and around the valleys of the great East Java rivers, the Branta and the Solo, in the so-called *Mancanegari*, or “outer realm,” of the central kingdom, are said to be more like the Central Javanese in their refined style of speech and behavior. On the other hand, those living in the arid limestone regions of the north coast, in the capital city of Surabaya, on the island of Madura, and in the eastern region of Java are said to talk faster and more frankly.

The people of East Java have developed a great variety of art forms. With no royal courts in

the Province after the fall of Mojopahit Dynasty in the 16th century, the majority of the arts remained those of the common people (*wong cilik*). In the towns and cities, the elite (*priyayi*) continue to be connoisseurs of the high arts of the neighboring courts, such as shadow puppet (*wayang*) plays and their derivatives. These forms are also enjoyed by common people but mostly by those living in what was the “outer realm” of the Central Javanese courts.

Performers from four artistic traditions have come from East Java to the Festival of American Folklife this year. The traditions represented are: peasant batik from Tuban on the north coast, which uses hand-woven cotton; masked dance-drama (*topeng dhlang*) of Madura, which is based on stories from the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*; *gandrung* social dance of

Banyuwangi; and the music and dance performance known as *reyog* from the region of Ponorogo on the western side of the Province. To illustrate the relationship between rural life and art forms, two of these, the batik of Kerek and *reyog* of Pono-

rogo, both symbols of the continuity of the Province’s rural heritage, are examined below.



## The Peasant Batik of Kerek

To the north of the limestone hills in north-eastern Java lie dozens of arid and rather bleak rural districts. Kerek, a subdistrict 30 km northwest of the coastal town of Tuban, is typical of the region except for the type of batik produced in several local villages.

Approaching Kerek by way of the paved road leading into the district, one notices homespun



*At a weekly market, women in Tuban Regency of East Java inspect cotton for batik. Although some of the women wear machine-made sarongs they all use a selendang (shawl worn over the shoulder) of local handmade batik material to carry their purchases. Photo by Rens Heringa*

batik sarongs worn by women working in the fields or walking along the road carrying woven bamboo baskets supported by an equally coarse batik *selendang* (a shawl-like sling worn over one shoulder). Perhaps nowhere else in Indonesia can one find this kind of batik, dyed on homespun fabric with bold, brightly-colored free-hand birds, flowers and other more abstract designs. Batik crafted elsewhere in Java is worked on fine, factory-produced cotton or even synthetic material and tends to use more muted colors.

Remarkably, some women of a single household, as in the past, still grow the cotton, spin it into yarn, weave yarn into cloth, make dyes from plants, and design and dye the cloth into batik. Natural dyes such as indigo for blue and *soga*, another vegetable dye for brown, remain the primary colors used in the process. They work

on each piece collectively, in between planting, harvesting and other tasks of subsistence farming, the major source of livelihood in the community. Today the batik is still valued for being sturdy enough to wear in the fields, and some prized pieces are handed down as cherished heirlooms.

In the past, a piece of batik was never sold as a commodity; it was worn by a woman of the household in which it was made. This has been gradually changing over the past five or six decades. Today people often take new or used batiks to sell on market days at the marketplace in Kerek. Local people have become aware of the value outsiders place on the material.

Batik making has recently become part of a rural development scheme. For the past decade the Ministry of Industries office in Tuban, pursuing a policy of promoting local small-scale industries within a framework of economic development, has tried to assist women of Kerek in transforming batik crafting into a truly income-generating industry. Officials in the Ministry would like the Tuban region to become known for a unique craft. The new uses created for Kerek's batik include tablecloths, pillowcases, modern dresses, skirts, vests, coats and even blazers.

One labor-saving idea that has been introduced into Kerek's batik industry is the use of the commercial dye naphthol. Though some traditionalists, both in Kerek and in the outside world, still prefer natural dyes, which they believe last much longer, most batik crafts-women now prefer to buy batik dyes rather than make natural dyes themselves. These new batik dyes include non-traditional colors such as yellow, green and purple. The availability of these dyes has changed the batik tradition of Kerek, but even some younger women who enjoy experimenting with these new colors continue to use the natural dyes side by side with commercial colors.

### **Reyog Ponorogo**

The Regency of Ponorogo is located in the Madiun river valley near the border of Central Java. It has been known for hundreds of years for





*Above: Young men from the village near Salatiga in Central Java perform a hobby-horse dance with a lion figure similar to the reyog tradition in East Java.*

Photo by Rachel Cooper

*Right: The figure of the reyog passes through the town of Ponorogo in East Java. The procession, which includes musicians, acrobats and clowns, re-enacts a battle between the tiger and the forces of a king.*

Photo by Sal Murgiyanto



its men (and women) of prowess, the *warok*. In this region, some of which was part of the “outer realm” of the kingdom of Mataram but was often difficult to rule, *warok* have until very recently been economically, politically and magically powerful local personages surrounded by bands of youths in a patron-client relationship. *Warok* and their followers, *warokan* and *gemblok*, perform *reyog* — a public dance drama — as a display of their power.

In any group of *reyog* performers, the *warok* and *warokan* can easily be identified as the older, more mature and fierce looking men dressed in black, loose-fitting three-quarter length trousers and collarless shirts. They wear a belt of twisted cotton yarn and coarse leather slippers. A number of them play musical instruments associated with the *reyog* performance: shawm (*slompret*), metal kettles (*kenong*), suspended gongs (*kempul*), small drum (*tipung*), very large drum

(*kendhang* Ponorogo) and several three-tube bamboo *angklung*. One or two *warok* or *warokan* carry the heavy tiger/lion mask and headdress that is the centerpiece of the *reyog* pageant and is decorated with hundreds of peacock feathers. Other *warok* and *warokan* take different roles in the play — clowns, nobles, etc.

The *gemblok*, junior members of the troupe



who enter into patron-client relationships with particular *warok* and *warokan*, perform the hobby-horse (*jaran kepang* or *jathilan*) dance. They are dressed in a more refined way, in imitation of the courtly dress of Central Javanese performers in *wayang* or *kethopak* plays. In the past these hobby-horse performers were often trance dancers. Nowadays the dancers sometimes cross-dress and — especially in the big cities outside Ponorogo where *reyog* troupes have also formed themselves — they may even be young girls who are not *gemblak*. In these big-city troupes men dress in the traditional black attire, but they do not seem to practice the traditional *warok/warokan* lifestyle, a change lamented by purists in Ponorogo.

In his quest for power, a person becomes a *warok* by following its traditional lifestyle, refraining from heterosexual relationships. In most cases this is a man who has accumulated wealth in agricultural land and livestock and feels ready to become a patron of less wealthy members of his village and surrounding communities. A few cases of female *warok* have been recorded, though these do not seem to exist today.

*Warok* arrange patron-client relationships with youths, the *gemblak* of the troupe. The rights and duties of this alliance, like those of a marriage, include economic and sexual aspects. The *warok* employs a matchmaker to reach an agreement with the parents of a particular youth. *Warok* provide the parents with cows, water buffaloes, or the use of a plot of land. A *warok's* power is proportional to the number of *gemblak* he can keep. When a youth comes of age, his *warok*-patron must arrange and pay for his marriage. A few *gemblak* do become *warok*, but this is rare.

In addition to independently wealthy *warok*, there have also been bands of unmarried young men who search for power, either in the service of a *warok* or not. These men are the *warokan* and normally share resources to keep a *gemblak* communally.

A *reyog* troupe did not originally perform for money or on a special occasion. Performances were primarily spectacular displays of prowess to

villagers. Performances nowadays, especially in urban areas, are focused on the acrobatics of lifting the heavy tiger/lion and peacock feather headdress and on the antics of the clowns. Some of these performances are done for a fee.

*Reyog* performances may last several hours and are usually performed during the day. They typically involve elaborate costumes, music and a lengthy procession of dancers and actors. There never seems to have been a set number of episodes in a *reyog* performance. Particular episodes in the performance are drawn from the following story. King Klanasewandana of Bantarangin traveled to the town of Kedhiri to ask for the princess in marriage. He was accompanied by 144 knights under the command of Bujangganong. In the jungle, the tiger Rajawana (the king of the woods) tried to devour the horses. Bujangganong fought the tiger but could not defeat him. The king asked help from the hermit Kyai Gunaresa. After the hermit rendered the tiger harmless, the king gave a feast that was graced by gamelan music and dancing, including a dance by a woman named Wayang Jopre and the clown Patrajaya. A contemporary performance of *reyog* retells this story in the earthy style of rural East Java and provides the viewer with a glance into a world of heroes, supernatural powers and trance.

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#### *Further Readings*

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