



***Murwakala* in Mass *Ruwatan* Ceremony in Surakarta: Its Relevance and Meaning in a Modern Perspective**

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Abstract

The *Ruwatan* tradition in Javanese culture involves a sacred performing art called *Murwakala*. This performance is carried out individually or collectively to self-purify, ask for forgiveness, or ward off disaster for individuals of various ages and social classes. Individuals categorized as *Sukerta* (bring bad luck, are dirty, or have disturbances) are considered not yet pure and, therefore, require a *ruwatan* (purification) ritual. Given the intensive use of symbols in the *ruwatan* ritual, understanding the messages conveyed through the performance art and ritual becomes problematic. This study aims to investigate how modern audiences interpret the *ruwatan* ritual. Using the theory of Symbolic Interaction, this study adopts a qualitative method. Data collection is done through observation, document studies, and in-depth interviews. Informants are the *ruwat* puppeteer, *ruwat* participants, and audiences. The findings of this research demonstrate that for the mass *ruwatan* tradition and *Murwakala* performance to maintain their relevance and significance in contemporary society, the symbolic meanings embedded within these practices must be conveyed more explicitly to both participants and the broader public. *Ruwatan* participants give meaning to ritual symbols and actions according to their cultural background, religion, and personal experience as an interpretation of the performance given by the *ruwat* puppeteer. Moreover, the study highlights the necessity of communicative innovation, such as implementing informational media, to support the continued vitality and relevance of *ruwatan* rituals in modernity.

Keywords: Javanese tradition, wayang *ruwatan*, effective communication, *dalang*, symbolic interaction

Introduction

Modern technology increasingly influences Indonesian society, yet its traditions and culture continue to thrive. A notable example is the *ruwatan* tradition, which remains a significant practice in Surakarta, Central Java. This soul-cleansing ceremony has been integral to Javanese life since ancient times and persists in contemporary society. The objective is to self-purification and avoid the threat of disaster. *Ruwatan* can be perpetrated individually or

collectively, regardless of gender or socio-economic background. Individuals who are believed to require *ruwatan* typically belong to the "*Sukerta*" group, representing those deemed to bring bad luck, are dirty, or have disturbances (Darmoko, 2002; Reksosusilo, 2006; Susanti & Lestari, 2021a; Wahidah, 2015).

Mass *ruwatan* is usually carried out through rituals and shadow puppetry performances led by *ruwat* puppeteers (*dalang ruwat*). *Ruwat* puppeteers differ from

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conventional shadow puppeteers due to their perceived ability to conduct ceremonies and execute rust spells (mantras). Consequently, not all shadow puppeteers possess the qualification to become *Ruwat* puppeteers.

The shadow puppet performance accompanying the *ruwatan* ceremony always uses the *Murwakala* performing art (Mariani, 2016). This performing arts has a specific storyline about *Batara Kala* (symbols of evil characters). As the name suggests, "*murwa*" means beginning, and "*kala*" means time (Darmoko, 2002). It tells a story about *Batara Kala*, who was born as a result of an inappropriate sexual relationship between *Batara Guru* and *Dewi Uma*. It resulted in *Batara Kala*'s birth as a greedy, evil, and uncontrollable giant. In order to rebalance the universe, *Batara Kala*'s father, *Batara Guru*, removed his son's four canine teeth so that he would no longer be violent. However, *Batara Kala* asked for a "ration" of food in the form of humans. The request was granted by *Batara Guru*, which allowed *Batara Kala* to consume 60 types of humans, called "*Sukerta*" (bring bad luck, are dirty, or have disturbances).

In the *ruwatan* ceremony, apart from holding puppets and preparing offerings, the *ruwat* puppeteer plays a vital role in linking the real world and the supernatural (Tjintariani, 2012). The *ruwat* puppeteer serves as the ceremonial leader and spiritual advisor and as the reciter of prayers and mantras to cleanse the "*Sukerta*" people participating in the ritual. The ritual has a series of ceremonies and puppet shadow performances that convey messages through symbols and stories to guide people to live politely. It is called "*tatanan*, *tuntunan*, and *tontonan*" (norms, values, guidelines, and entertainment).

The previous study by Kuriandini and Artono (2021) discusses the *Ruwatan Agung Nuswantara* tradition in Mojokerto Regency in the period 1959-2019. This research reveals that this *ruwatan* always progresses in every implementation over time. Many adjustments have been made to support the smooth running of this *ruwatan* following current technology and information without changing the procedures for the *ruwatan* procession (Kuriandini & Artono, 2021). Another research discusses rowan as a disaster relief ceremony in the sociocultural review of Javanese society, highlighting this ceremony as an effort to balance the universe from the imbalance between the big universe (macrocosm) and the small universe (microcosm) (Darmoko, 2002). Furthermore, another study focuses on a situation when humans are considered *Sukerta* or impure and need to be freed from the threat of disaster (Setianingsih et al., 2022). Another research discusses the transformation of slametan *ruwatan* from a pure Javanese tradition to a combination of Javanese and Islamic religion (Dahniar, 2017).

As time passes and Islamic law is introduced into daily life, especially in Javanese society, various traditional rituals are changing to be more relevant and follow sharia. The *Batara Kala wayang* performances are also adapted to Islamic teachings, one of which is carried out by reading verses from the Al Quran. The puppeteer also gives a different meaning to the *Batara Kala* character, which is linked to Islamic teachings about the concept of time.

The shadow puppet performances for *ruwatan* are always based on a *Murwakala* or *Sudamala* story. As explained by Masitoh (2021) and Rusdy (2012), the term

"*Murwakala*" refers to the act of liberating children from the peril of being consumed by *Batara Kala*, a mythological figure. In contrast, "*ruwatan Sudamala*" encompasses a series of rituals designed to emancipate individuals from negative emotions and behaviors, promoting a state of genuine surrender. It also means praying to God Almighty to be released from all dangers.

The group of individuals known as "*Sukerta*" refers to those deemed to need purification to prevent potential disasters. This category includes varying configurations of children, each associated with specific classifications. For instance, "*ontang-anting*" denotes a single child, regardless of gender, while "*pancuran kapit sendang*" refers to three children with a male child positioned centrally. Conversely, "*sendang kapit pancuran*" denotes three children with a female child in the middle. Other classifications include "*uger-uger lawang*" for two males, "*kembang sepasang*" for two females, "*kendhana-kendhini*" for a combination of two boys and a girl, "*pendhawa*" for five boys, "*pendhawi*" or "*mancalaputri*" for five girls, as well as twin boys or twin girls. Additional categories of *Sukerta* encompass children born during specific times of day, such as at sunrise, sunset, or midday, and those born with the umbilical cord wrapped around them. In Javanese tradition, it is believed that without appropriate purification, individuals in these classifications may face significant challenges in life. (Ardhianto & Zaman, 2024; Susanto, 2017).

At the same time, a puppet shadow that is essential to perform during *ruwatan* is *Murwakala*. The *Murwakala* performing arts, called Purwakala, is an original Javanese supernatural story before the Java Saka era

or the Java Dwipa era (Setiawan, 2018). New Javanese poets later re-wrote these stories as *Serat Paramayoga* (advice for young people). *Murwa* or *purwa* signifies the start, and *kala* refers to time, so *Murwakala* represents the onset of time or a period where everything is fresh and new (Fitriya, 2022; Setiawan, 2018).

The original story about *Murwakala* consists of three parts. The first part tells the *wayang* story about the gods in their realm. The second part tells about the gods who came to Marcapada (the human world) and were assigned by *Batara Guru* to help humans save themselves from *Batara Kala*. Next, the third part discusses the nature of human life, taught by the puppeteer, and the moral principles needed to achieve world peace. Masitoh further explained that the *Murwakala* play in Purwa shadow puppet performances has historically been performed from the beginning of the 17th century until now (Masitoh, 2021). *Murwakala*, which is held for *ruwatan* ceremonies, generally provides advice and lessons to the community about self-concept and the concept of time. According to its purpose, the pure shadow puppet show with the play *Murwakala* should provide spectacle, guidance, and order. These three things are also the concept of a *wayang* performance, which must always be fulfilled.

Challenges emerge due to a declining comprehension of ancestral traditions within contemporary society, as the Minister of the State Secretariat notes. The preservation and transmission of *ruwatan* as a vital aspect of Javanese cultural heritage face significant obstacles amid rapid modernization and shifting societal values (Handayani et al., 2024). Similarly, other research showed that Indonesian teenagers now prefer foreign cultures to locals (Dangga, 2023; Dewi et al.,

2024). In addition, performances conducted in a mixture of Javanese and Kawi (Old Javanese Language) can be an obstacle for the audience to easily understand the messages the puppeteer conveys.

This research aims to uncover the relevance and meaning of *Murwakala* performing arts held at mass *ruwatan* activities in Surakarta, Central Java, from a modern perspective. The mass *ruwatan* ceremony presented in this context is notably distinctive due to its organization by a university, marking a divergence from traditional practices. Unlike typical *ruwatan* ceremonies, which are often conducted as individual or family events or in conjunction with local initiatives such as community clean-up efforts, harvest festivals, or other communal activities, this academic-driven approach introduces a structured and collective dimension to the ritual. This variation not only underscores the adaptability of cultural practices but also highlights the role of educational institutions in preserving and innovating traditional rites within contemporary societal frameworks (Muada, 2021; Wicaksana & Wicaksandita, 2023). In addition, previous works focus on the ethnocultural aspects of the topic. This research provides a fresh viewpoint by examining it from a communication perspective.

Research Method

This research employed qualitative methods to explore how people interpret and give meaning to their experiences facing a social or human problem (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2022). Data were collected through observations at mass *ruwatan* activities to coincide with the 9th World Puppet Day

commemoration, organized by the Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI) Surakarta, Central Java. In addition, data were also obtained through interviews with informants. The informants in this research were male *ruwat* puppeteer (BS), female *ruwat* puppeteer (RA), mass *ruwat* participants (SWI and SWM), and *ruwat* audience (DH).

The secondary data was collected from documents in scientific articles, news on several reputable homepages on the Internet, and audio-visual data from Javanese arts-themed videos broadcast on official *Wayang* Communities YouTube channels.

Symbolic Interaction Theory was utilized as the theoretical framework in this research. Mead (in Blumer, 1969) believes that human thinking, self-concept, and what circulates in society are formed through communication (Blumer, 1969; Syamsudin et al., 2022). Mead then explained that everything or objects in human life have symbolic meaning. These meanings are not taken for granted but presented, agreed upon, and used as symbols. The connection with human interaction is bridged using these symbols by interpretation and ensuring the meaning of other people's actions. It is not just by reacting to each other as in the previously emerged Stimulus-Response communication model.

Furthermore, Blumer (1969) sharpened what Mead conveyed by formulating three main principles in symbolic interaction: meaning, language, and thought. In their application, the principles highlight that people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, whereas these meanings arise from social interaction. Meanings are modified through interpretive processes used by individuals.

Symbolic interactionism has been utilized in cultural and spatial analyses. Hasim et al. (2023) apply the theory to study vernacular cultural landscapes in Indonesia, demonstrating how community interactions and symbols influence spatial configurations and cultural preservation. Meanwhile, Poland, Konecki, and Kacperczyk (2022) trace the development of SI, highlighting its integration with grounded theory and its impact on qualitative sociological research.

Furthermore, the theory has also been used to examine social networks. Töpfer and Behrmann (2022) propose an interactionist approach to qualitative network research, focusing on how meanings are constructed and negotiated within social relationships. They believe that from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, social networks are understood as webs of relationships that only become significant when individuals assign meaning to them. These meanings are continually created, maintained, or transformed through social interactions. As such, social networks are noticed as meaningfully organized, shaped through interaction, context-dependent, and evolving. In another field, public sociology, Spivey (2017) employed the theory in participatory research with a Native American tribe, illustrating how collaborative efforts can address cultural identity and recognition issues.

Concerning this research on mass lockups, the relevance, and meaning will be caught from two perspectives: the puppeteer as the sender or messenger and the audience as the message's recipient. The audience is divided into two groups: the *ruwat* participants and the general audience. This research offers two viewpoints from the

puppeteer's angle, specifically from male and female *ruwat* puppeteers, each governed by distinct responsibilities and obligations.

Results and discussion

The Meaning of Symbols in Javanese Culture

The Javanese are one of the prominent ethnic groups in Indonesia, renowned for their rich cultural heritage, which includes a diverse array of symbolic representations. These symbols reflect the Javanese people's distinctive traditions, beliefs, and historical context, contributing to the broader tapestry of Indonesia's cultural identity (Muslich, 2016; Sulistyono & Sunarmi, 2020). Javanese society is formed by a traditional community that combines myth, magic, religion, and science, which coexist in harmonious social relations.

The symbol in Javanese culture depends on geographical location, considering that the island of Java is divided into several areas: East, Central, and West Java. Even in the West Java area, where the Sundanese tribe is located, the symbols and traditions can differ. The significance of this symbol to the Javanese population lies in its role as a medium for transmitting messages, emphasizing cultural sensibilities and politeness. Additionally, Javanese culture encompasses evolving traditions that can be categorized into two primary domains: the first pertains to perspectives on existence, spirituality, and philosophical orientations. At the same time, the second relates to ethical and moral conduct (Sulistyo & Sunarmi, 2020). In Javanese culture, all actions and endeavors in life must have a vertical connection to God while maintaining a deep respect for ancestors.

According to history, *Ruwatan* is a Javanese and Balinese tradition that has been carried out since ancient times. This tradition can be traced even to the Majapahit and Mataram kingdoms in the 17th century (Mariani, 2016). Mariani explains that after the collapse of the Majapahit kingdom and the emergence of the Mataram kingdom, the tradition of soul-cleaning, which was initially called *lukat*, was changed to *ruwatan*, specifically called "*Ruwatan Murwakala*." Furthermore, it is explained that *ruwat* rituals can be divided into three groups: self-purification, environment purification, and region purification (Pamungkas, 2008).

Ruwatan, in the Javanese tradition, is always carried out with puppet shadow performances and is held during the day. This task is rich in communication and messages embodying high ideals (Afiyanto & Winanti, 2022). Those values are conveyed symbolically, metaphorically, and aesthetically (Rodiyah et al., 2024). This communication and directive can guide the community in engaging in social interactions and coexisting in their surroundings, ensuring they remain peaceful, comfortable, secure, and thriving (Sundari & Mustamar, 2020). For example, The *Murwakala* performing arts present a narrative that explores the emergence of Kala, which arises from *Batara Guru*'s intense desire for *Dewi Uma* while simultaneously referencing *Dewi Andini*.

This narrative encapsulates a profound message regarding individuals' need to adhere to moral principles in their lives and actions. Transgressions against these moral codes entail repercussions that one must be prepared to face. The conveyance of this message is achieved through engaging storytelling and melodic compositions, which

enhance its retention among the audience. Furthermore, the rituals and procedures embedded within the *ruwatan* ceremony impart significant messages essential for continual remembrance and adherence.

As for the relationship with *Sukerta*, the message is related to the loving relationship between parents and children. Children should be considered biological products and gifts from God, who must be cared for and educated well (Kamajaya et al., 1996). The *ruwatan* ceremony is an effort to protect the safety and welfare of children. On the other hand, children are also obliged to obey and respect their parents, which is symbolized by the *sungkeman* procession (a sign of respect, apology, and blessing to parents) during *ruwatan*.

Dalang as a Communicator in Ruwatan

The puppeteer in the *ruwatan* holds a critical position, apart from being the leader of the ceremony, as well as being a spiritual advisor, storyteller, and also as representative of the parents of the *Sukerta* (*ruwatan* participants). The role of the puppeteer in the *ruwatan* ceremony is highly significant, necessitating that it be performed not by an ordinary puppeteer but specifically by a *ruwat* puppeteer who is a descendant of *Ki Panjangmas* (Efendi, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2014). Despite—following certain opinions—that a *ruwat* puppeteer must be a man and have a wife, a female puppeteer is also acceptable to be a *ruwat* puppeteer, as in the case of Informant RA.

Informant RA, one of the senior *ruwat* puppeteers and a direct descendant of the palace puppeteers of the Pakubuwono X, stated that historically, the first female *ruwat* puppeteer was *Dewi Kili Suci*. She chose to

become a puppeteer after refusing to become the successor to her father's throne. The influence of Dewi Kili Suci was profoundly significant for Informant RA. Before each *ruwat* ceremony, Informant RA consistently undertook a special pilgrimage to the shrine of Dewi Kili Suci in East Java. She prayed for her ancestors and sought their blessings (Informant RA interview result, 2024).

Furthermore, Informant RA stated that the requirements for a *ruwat* puppeteer are not solely in terms of gender. The person concerned must marry off their children (become son/daughter-in-law/mantu). This statement complied with Informant BS's assertion. He also stated that an additional requirement for anyone wishing to become a *ruwat* puppeteer is to possess the courage to undertake the role and have received approval from seven *ruwat* puppeteers. This approval is demonstrated through the testimonies of these seven puppeteers when the individual takes the lead in the *ruwatan*. However, for gender selection, Informant BS stated that he only followed what was taught by his (male) ancestors, who were also the *ruwat* puppeteers.

"Usually, if there are still elders in their descendants who are still alive and are the ruwat puppeteers, young puppeteers will not dare to take that position. However, the ruwat and blencong books (lighting sources or torches that function to animate the shadows of the puppets on the screen) have been given. If the moment is not right, we cannot complete the task" (Informant BS interview result, 2024).

Despite being considered a senior puppeteer, Informant BS started as a *ruwat* puppeteer in 2009, when there was a need to perform *ruwat* for married couples. The *ruwat* puppeteer who was originally going to lead the ritual suddenly passed away, so Informant

BS replaced his position. Coincidentally, Informant BS had just married off his child (became son-in-law/mantu), so he met the requirements to become a *ruwat* puppeteer.

From these two opinions, it can be ascertained that the *ruwat* performer, the *ruwat* puppeteer, has a powerful sacred element, as it is not just a performing art. The *ruwat* puppeteer is closely related to heredity and receives a "calling," so it is not easy to replace an ordinary *dalang*. That also led to the term "true puppeteer" or "*dalang* trah" for *ruwat* puppeteers.

For Informant RA, *ruwatan* is a complete performance involving a synergy between the puppeteer's invocations, holy musical instruments, offerings, and processions performed at a designated frequency. This intricate process leads to metaphysical guidance or the manifestation of an activity of significant importance (Informant RA's interview result, 2024). It was also confirmed by Informant BS, who stated that the participants and the *ruwat* masterminds had to prepare several things, including fasting for 7 days and preparing various offerings.

Informant BS highlighted that the individual orchestrating the event bears the most significant responsibility for ensuring the legitimacy of a *ruwatan*. This is why *ruwatan* should be conducted with careful planning rather than carelessly. Complementing these opinions, based on Soepadjar in Kamajaya et al. (1996), it is stated that *ruwatan* contains three aspects: philosophy, psychology, and social reality, which become a mutually supporting force. *Ruwatan* teaches about recognizing identity, emotions, and needs, while the social aspect is realized through a series of actions as cultural facts. Soepadjar emphasized that *ruwatan* is a corrective

ceremony so that everything returns to what was outlined by the Almighty.

Mantra, The Integral Part of *Ruwatan*

During the *ruwatan* ceremony, all participants and the audience were invited to watch the *Murwakala* performing arts and follow the courts of rituals held by the *ruwatan* puppeteer. In the middle of the ceremony, the *ruwatan* puppeteer would recite a set of mantras. The mantra holds a supernatural aspect in *ruwatan*, which puts the *ruwatan* puppeteer as the mediator between the Creator and humans. The mantras open a bridge of prayers to the Almighty.

The *ruwatan* puppeteer then recited the mantra verbatim by reading the mantra notes, not based on memory. Informant BS stated that reading the mantra notes is important so they will be recited perfectly.

"It is the same as we read Pancasila during the Indonesian flag ceremony. We usually hold a piece of paper and read the five precepts. It is called "reading" for a reason, so we must read it (Informant BS interview result, 2024).

The interview results with informant BS indicate a significant emphasis on accurate textual performance in the *ruwatan* ritual. Reciting mantras verbatim from notes, rather than relying on memorization as is common in oral traditions, indicates an orientation toward the precision and authority of written texts. This phenomenon suggests a dynamic shift in the transmission of ritual knowledge from an oral transmission model to one that relies more on textual documentation.

The analogy provided by informant BS with the recitation of Pancasila in a flag ceremony underscores the view that the act of "reading" has its significance, not merely as a means of conveying information, but as an

effort to ensure the accurate and appropriate reproduction of source texts that are considered sacred or have formal legitimacy. This emphasis on textual accuracy can also be interpreted as a response to modernization and an effort to preserve the *ruwatan* tradition amidst changing times by adopting more structured and documented quality control mechanisms. Further research is needed to explore how this orientation toward written texts influences participants' experiences of the *ruwatan* ritual and their understanding of the meaning and function of the ritual.

From the *Sukerta* point of view, the mantra is a part of total recumbence to God. During the mantra recital, the *Sukertas* must pray and surrender to God, as stated by informants :

"We have to pray and ask God for forgiveness, ask Him to answer our wishes and remove our impurity" (Informant SWA and SWM interview result, 2023).

The results of interviews with SWA and SWM informants highlight the theological dimension of the *ruwatan* ritual from *Sukerta's* perspective. The statement that the mantra is part of "total recumbence to God" indicates that this ritual is understood as a profane act and a means to get closer to the Almighty. Furthermore, the emphasis on prayer and asking for forgiveness during the recitation of the mantra indicates that *Sukerta* views the *ruwatan* ritual as an opportunity to cleanse himself from "impurity" and to pray to fulfill his hopes.

***Murwakala*, The Crucial Performing Arts in *Ruwatan* Ceremony**

Murwakala is a distinctive performing arts traditionally showcased during *ruwatan*, a ceremony associated with spiritual purification. This theatrical presentation

is part of the *ruwatan* ritual aimed at safeguarding against *Batara Kala*, ensuring that he does not target *Sukerta* (Rusdy, 2012). This performance art is also depicted as a symbol of misbehavior by violators violated by *Batara Guru* and *Dewi Uma* (Mariani, 2016).

Multiple messages are suggested in this play, specifically (1) When *Batara Guru* disguised himself as a *Kandhabuwana* puppeteer to *ruwatan*, the message is implied that there is a will to save humanity through the medium of puppeteering and *ruwatan*, (2) When *Jatusmati* (humans) being ordered to soak in the *Madirdha Lake*, it implied the efforts made by humans to seek salvation, (3) When *Batara Kala* met *Dalang Kandhabuwana*, the dialogue that occurs is a depiction of humans having a dialogue with the Creator, through the intermediary of the puppeteer. It was concluded that the *Murwakala* implies the value and nature of human life, relationships with the Creator, relationships with others, relationships with their environment, and relationships with themselves (Mariani, 2017).

The staged *wayang* plays must be adapted to the activities' objectives (Rusdy, 2012). One example is *Murwakala*, which serves as a fitting performance for self-purification due to its connection to removing negative influences from a person. On the other hand, concerning *ruwat*, which pertains to maintaining village cleanliness, Rusdy mentioned that a more appropriate play is *Makukuhan* or *Sri Mulih*. This argument was supported by Informant BS, who indicated that when he facilitated *ruwat* for couples preparing for marriage, the play performed was *Parto Kromo*. The central theme of this play is "love must be fought for" (Kabarno, 2019). Rusdy further noted that

the *Murwakala* and *Ruwatan* performances enhance individual and collective suggestions and restore psychological self-confidence to confront life's challenges.

Sajen, the Central Part of The Ritual

Sajen or *sasaji* (offering) is an inseparable part of *ruwatan*. According to Afiyanto et al. (2022) and Kumaidi et al. (2023), offerings embody appreciation or glorification of God Almighty and respect for ancestors, guardians of residences, villages, and the country. *Sajen* also requests protection to obtain safety and prosperity. The way *ruwatan* is interpreted and presented can change based on the beliefs of individual puppeteers, just as the kinds of offerings may vary. Nonetheless, this diversity does not need to be dismissed or contested since the primary goal remains: a plea for safety and well-being (Ikhtia, 2024; Kumaidi & Fahrudi, 2023; Rodiyah et al., 2024).

Informant BS also makes an identical claim about the various types of offerings, as shown in the interview results below.

"The sajens were not kept or requested by the ruwat puppeteer. After the event, the sajens can be given to anyone who wants them" (Informant BS interview result, 2024).

Informant BS reveals that when grouped, the *sajen* consist of agricultural products, agricultural tools, kitchen utensils, livestock/poultry, *sinjang*/cloth, sleeping utensils, and food. The number can vary, depending on the direction of *Ki Dalang*, who leads the *ruwatan*. Again, Informant BS stated that the offerings were not kept or requested by the *ruwat* puppeteer, indicating that the puppeteer did not have any claim of ownership or exclusive control over the offerings. The practice of giving offerings to anyone who wanted them after the event indicates the existence of

a circulation and redistribution system of offerings in society.

Furthermore, these seven groups of *sajen* essentially symbolize life and human life according to Javanese cultural understanding (Afiyanto & Winanti, 2022; Efendi, 2021). *Sajen* is also a symbol of loyalty and love for the earth and all its contents. In another interpretation, some *dalangs* also allow offerings in miniature/imitation form. Even so, Informant BS and Informant RA prefer to follow the standards and do not recommend modifications to the *ruwatan* standards, for example holding the ceremony without *sajen*, as has been done by other puppeteers.

Understandably, the various types of *sajen* and preparation make the *ruwatan* ceremony expensive. As stated by Informant SWA and SWM:

"Ruwatan can be as expensive as ordering a wayang performance, even more luxurious. Not only because we must prepare many sajens, such as a pair of hens and rooster, pigeons, catfishes, sticky rice, roasted chicken, and many more, but we also need to prepare a set of jariks (Javanese batik with specific motifs) which then will be put on the kelir (wayang screen). In ruwatan, we must do a siraman ritual, which also takes up much of the budget" (Informant SWA and SWM interview result, 2023).

As a result, numerous individuals opt to participate in mass *ruwatan* since they can divide the costs. For instance, during the *Wayang Day Celebration* at ISI, a specific committee was tasked with gathering the offerings, so the participants only had to provide funds to the committee.

Although *sajen* are the central part of *ruwatan*, it turned out that the meaning of each of these offerings was not fully understood and communicated to *ruwat* participants and the audience. Informant

SWA and SWM explained that there was no specific explanation regarding the meaning of the various *sajen*. They only followed the instructions given by the *ruwat* puppeteer and the spiritual advisor on duty. Before the *ruwatan*, participants were only given brief instructions, such as being asked to wear the white fabric as a layer of clothing and having to fast since dawn.

The Informant SWA and SWM stated that although they did not quite understand the specific meaning of the *sajen*, they were sure that some of the rituals, such as the hair-cutting ceremony, were accomplished to cut bad luck.

"We understand that using white fabric is a symbol of purity, which is the essence of the ruwatan itself" (Informant SWA and SWM interview result, 2023).

In the *ruwatan* ritual, selecting symbolic elements is not random but based on a deep understanding of the meaning contained therein. One example is the use of white cloth, which, according to informants SWA and SWM, is a visual representation of the concept of "purity," which is the essence of the *ruwatan* ritual itself. The color white, which is universally associated with purity and cleanliness, serves as a reminder of the primary purpose of this ritual: to cleanse oneself from all forms of impurity and start a new chapter. Thus, the white cloth is not just a material but a symbol that actively communicates the meaning and purpose of the ritual to the participants, helping them to internalize and understand the essence of *ruwatan*. The consistent use of symbols like this helps maintain the continuity of the meaning and tradition of the ritual from generation to generation, ensuring that the message being conveyed remains relevant and meaningful to each individual involved.

From the audience's perspective, there is a notable absence of clear explanations regarding the sequence of events, the thematic essence of the play, and the significance of the various symbols presented. Informant H, a spectator from Jakarta who specifically traveled to Solo for the mass *ruwatan* event, articulated his limited understanding of the offerings associated with the *ruwatan* ritual. He also expressed uncertainty about interpreting the *Murwakala* performing arts that was performed despite being raised in a Javanese family. For him, *ruwatan* represents a cultural tradition within Javanese society, primarily intended to purify *Sukerta*. Nevertheless, he expressed enjoyment of the puppet show that took place.

Concerning this phenomenon, the *ruwatan* guidelines stated that before the *ruwatan* ceremony, *Sukerta* children need to be understood sufficiently by their parents and elders who understand the meaning and purpose of *ruwatan*. So that when the ceremony takes place, those being *ruwat* can appreciate the meaning of the ritual being carried out, and the message can be more deeply embedded in their minds and hearts. An empty soul that lives life without appreciation becomes a waste.

The Relevance of *Ruwatan* to Modern Life

While *wayang* performances in *ruwatan* are rooted in cultural tradition, they are not seen as rigid or resistant to development. Mariani, Setianingsih, et al., and Rodiyah et al. discuss how implementing the *Murwakala Ruwatan* can evolve in response to sociocultural shifts, changes in the community environment, and technology adaptations. (Mariani, 2016; Rodiyah et al., 2024; Setianingsih et al., 2022). According to

them, the flexibility that occurs is part of the survival aspect.

Informant BS, in carrying out *ruwat*, agrees with this flexibility element in *ruwatan*. He also provides the elements of innovation in his performance. These include making puppets for each *ruwatan* participant, which are all covered in white cloth and fresh flowers, always showing new *Batara Kala* puppets, and making new song arrangements/*tembang*. Not all *ruwat* puppeteers use this method; instead, they use old *wayang*. Suwarno does this to give a fresh touch to his performances creatively and interestingly.

Concerning performance protocols, *ruwatan* can be modified to meet the requirements of a professional audience; for instance, it can be utilized to conduct practices ahead of the main event to guarantee that the performance goes off without a hitch, as stated below.

"Actual ruwatan cannot be accomplished with practice. However, some people practice, like practicing musical arrangements, to ensure everything runs smoothly. It is not part of tradition but a way to ensure the vent runs smoothly" (Informant BS interview result, 2024).

In recent years, numerous *ruwatan* performances have increasingly incorporated live-streaming features via the Internet, enabling real-time viewership for audiences across diverse geographical locations. This technological integration expands the reach of these cultural events and enhances engagement by allowing a broader audience to participate in traditional practices from the comfort of their homes. Examples of the *ruwatan* performances broadcasted via YouTube include the ISI Surakarta Official channel, Sujiwo Tejo channel, *Dalang* Seno channel, Darjo TV, and even on official

government channels such as the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and the Bojonegoro Regency Government. As a cultural performance, this practice is indeed quite common. Technically, it is permissible and does not contravene cultural guidelines. However, participants in *ruwat* cannot be represented solely by online participants or by displaying clothing or objects belonging to them at the event location if they are absent or elsewhere.

"Ruwat is a horizontal-vertical moment (dialogue) with the Almighty. Cannot be represented by another person, cannot be accomplished (Informant BS interview result, 2024)

In terms of the ceremony and *wayang* performance, it is not uncommon for several adjustments to be made so that the audience and participants feel more comfortable. An example is compressing the performance from 6 to 3 hours.

"The story is not abridged or cut, but only condensed. For example, by reducing slashes or war scenes" (Informant BS interview result, 2024).

Even amidst the onslaught of technology and modern lifestyles, Informants BS is confident that *ruwatan* will remain sustainable. An example of this can be observed at Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, where an annual *ruwatan* event showcases renowned *ruwat* puppeteers. This event consistently draws large crowds and is regarded as a successful endeavor. According to Suwarno, the *ruwat* tradition will likely endure since people continue to value and seek it despite the significant financial investment involved.

Symbolic Interaction Theory (Blumer, 1969; Griffin et al., 2023; Husin et al., 2021; Syamsudin et al., 2022) emphasizes the importance of symbols in the communication

process and the formation of social meaning. In mass *ruwatan* ceremonies, symbols such as mantras, prayers, ritual tools, and ritual actions have deep meaning for the participants. These symbols communicate spiritual messages and reinforce the cultural identity and values of the ceremony's community. In Javanese society, mass *ruwatan* ceremonies involve symbols that refer to cultural teachings and beliefs, such as mantras recited by puppeteers to cleanse the body and soul.

In addition, symbolic interaction theory highlights how social interaction and the interpretation of symbols contribute to forming social identity. In a mass *ruwatan* ceremony, ritual participants identify themselves as individuals and members of a group or community that shares certain beliefs and values. Participation in mass *ruwatan* ceremonies can strengthen a group's sense of solidarity and cohesion and strengthen their cultural and religious identity. In societies that hold mass *ruwatan* ceremonies, individuals may feel more connected to their ethnic or religious identity through the shared experience of the ritual. The concept of social interaction in symbolic interaction theory highlights the importance of communication and the exchange of meaning between individuals in a broader social context.

In a mass *ruwatan* ceremony, social interaction occurs between ritual participants, the ceremony leader, and other ritual elements, which highlights the importance of interactions in social networks that help shape meanings as they are continually created, maintained, or transformed (Töpfer & Behrmann, 2022). Nonverbal communication, especially ritual symbols, strengthens social relationships between participants and creates shared experiences that deepen their

social ties. This social interaction also allows participants to strengthen each other's beliefs and values that underlie the mass *ruwatan* ceremony.

Furthermore, symbolic interaction theory suggests that social reality is built through interpreting symbols. In a mass *ruwatan* ceremony, ritual participants give meaning to ritual symbols and actions according to their cultural background, religion, and personal experience as an interpretation of the performance given by the *ruwat* puppeteer. The symbols used in the ritual often reflect beliefs about the universe, the Creator, and other supernatural powers. Through the interpretation of these symbols, ritual participants build a shared understanding of the spiritual world and strengthen their belief in the symbolic power involved in the ritual. It further supports the finding by Hasim et al. (2023) that demonstrates how symbols can influence cultural preservation.

This theory also considers how social interactions and the interpretation of symbols can influence long-term social and cultural change. Although mass *ruwatan* ceremonies are often considered a conservative tradition, these practices can also transform with social, economic, and political changes. Mass *ruwatan* practices may transform form, content, or meaning with globalization and modernization. It underlines how collaborative efforts can address cultural identity and recognition (Spivey, 2017). Nevertheless, the essential values underpinning the mass *ruwatan* ceremony can persist and be honored by ritual practitioners through collaborative efforts. Such adaptations may reflect the dynamic interplay between traditional practices and contemporary influences, suggesting that the

core tenets of cultural heritage can endure amidst evolving sociocultural landscapes.

Conclusion

Mass *ruwatan* is a Javanese cultural practice that continues to be upheld in contemporary society, as it is regarded as a significant ritual for individuals identified within the *Sukerta* group. The symbols contained in the *ruwatan* tradition aim to communicate spiritual messages and strengthen cultural identity and community values. *Ruwat* puppeteers are critical in this tradition because they mediate between the real and spiritual worlds.

Mass *ruwatan* is a Javanese tradition still preserved to this day, believed to be an effort for individuals from the *Sukerta* group. The symbols contained in the *ruwatan* tradition are intended to communicate spiritual messages and strengthen cultural identity and community values. The *ruwat* puppeteer holds a critical position in this tradition because he is considered a mediator between the real and spiritual worlds.

Unfortunately, the various important symbols involved in *ruwatan* activities and *wayang kulit* performances are not explained in detail to participants, audiences, and the general public. So, there is still a possibility that many people do not understand the meaning and advice implied in them.

As a suggestion, to ensure that the communication message through the *ruwatan* tradition and the "*Murwakala*" performing arts is conveyed to the audience, it is necessary to provide informative media - such as program books, flyers, or other interactive media - so that the audience can appreciate and practice them more. Suggestions for further

research include an in-depth exploration of the effectiveness of various educational media, such as program books, flyers, and interactive digital platforms, in enhancing audience understanding and appreciation of the complex symbolism and narratives in the *ruwatan* ritual and the *Murwakala* shadow puppet show. This study can measure the impact of educational media on audience knowledge, interpretation of meaning, and emotional engagement, as well as identify the most effective communication strategies to preserve and promote Javanese cultural heritage in the modern era.

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