

# ***Langendriyan*: The Expression of Cross-gendered Performance in a Javanese Dance Drama and Its Influence on Local Community**

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## **Introduction**

This paper analyzes the relationship between the circumstances of the genesis of a unique Javanese dance drama, *Langendriyan* and the expression of its cross-gendered performance from the perspectives of performer, movement, costume, and song. It also explores the influence of its expression on the local community.

*Langendriyan*, which I am discussing in this paper, was created in the late nineteenth century at *Mangkunegaran* palace, in Surakarta,<sup>1</sup> Central Java, Indonesia. It has been continuously performed up to the present day. All the lines of the play are sung in Javanese traditional verse called *tembang*, and the subject matter was taken from the legend of *Damarwulan*,<sup>2</sup> a story of the *Majapahit* kingdom period (end of the thirteenth c. ~ beginning of the sixteenth c.) in East Java. The theme is battle (victory and death), devotion, and love (romance) around the king as the center of the world.<sup>3</sup> Its most distinguishing feature is that women play all of the roles. In central Java, it was common for men to play women's roles or men to dance women's dances, but there was no opposite case seen before *Langendriyan*. That is why it is very original and unique.

## **Circumstances of the genesis of *Langendriyan***

At the time *Langendriyan* was created, the political situation of central Java was complex. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the *Mataram* kingdom, which ruled the area, was divided into 4 parts under the control of the Dutch East India

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the two forms of *Langendriyan* were created nearly simultaneously in Jogjakarta and Surakarta, the then dual capitals of Central Java at that time. The circumstances of their birth and the formation of both of these forms of *Langendriyan* are different, and beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The legend of *Damarwulan* was based on *Pakem Wasana* and it was mainly used for *Wayang Kelitik* (a puppet play which uses thin wooden puppets and was popular in Eastern Java). It originated in Eastern Java, but it was very popular in Central Java by the seventeenth century. (Theodore G. Th. Pigeaud, *Literature of Java Vol. I: Synopsis of Javanese Literature 900—1900 A.D.*, The Hague: Martinus Nyhoff, 1967, p. 232)

<sup>3</sup> All art work in palaces was dedicated to the kings who were the center of the world before the Indonesia independence.

Company. Hence, there were four royal palaces in a relatively small area.

*Mangkunegaran* was one of these royal palaces. The royal families of each of these four palaces lost political power and focused instead on culture. They competed with each other aiming to reconstruct the "ideal type of old Javanese culture"<sup>4</sup> based on their knowledge of the *Majapahit* kingdom. As a result, artistic activities thrived and each palace started to develop a distinct style of dance, music, puppetry, literature, and even clothing. The creation of *Langendriyan* was greatly affected by this political situation.

However, the question remains why was this all-woman dance drama developed in the *Mangkunegaran* palace, and not in another palace? I propose that it was related to the women's social status at *Mangkunegaran*. In *Mangkunegaran*, women enjoyed relative equality with men from its beginning. They were given jobs according to their ability rather than societal conventions, which would have been unlikely in other palaces. They were selected as soldiers, clerks for the palace, delegates to different palaces, dancers and musicians. Women held important positions related to politics, defense, economy, and culture in the society of *Mangkunegaran*.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there was enough social ground for an all-woman dance drama to develop in *Mangkunegaran*.

Also, *Langendriyan* had a role in connecting the palace to the common people. Actually, in Surakarta, *Langendriyan* was born among the common people and later accepted into *Mangkunegaran*. This occurred because the kings of *Mangkunegaran* were close to the common people.<sup>6</sup> Even after *Langendriyan* entered into the *Mangkunegaran*, the common people were able to enjoy *Langendriyan* performances, which was impossible in the other palaces.<sup>7</sup> From these facts, we could also say that the *Mangkunegaran* had a distinctive character of openness and was free from old traditions.

There were several other important factors related to the genesis of *Langendriyan*. The first one was that the economy of *Mangkunegaran* became successful in the second half of the nineteenth century from the profits of coffee, sugar, spice, and rice

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<sup>4</sup> Kenji Tsuchiya, "Jogjakarta—Formation and Expansion of <Capital> in Central Java. (Jogjakarta—Chubu Jawa ni okeru <miyako> no seiritsu to tenkai) ", *South-east Asian Studies (Tonan Asia Kenkyu)* 21-1, June 1983, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Hilmiyah Darmawan Pontjowolo, R. Ay., *Peranan Wanita Mangkunegaran Dari Masa ke Masa*, (Surakarta, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> About the affinity of the kings of Mangkunegaran and the common people, see, Zainuddin Fananie, *Restrukturisasi Budaya Jawa: Perspektif KGPAA MN I*, Muhammadiyah University Press, Surakarta, 1994, pp. 144-145, also see, W.E. Soetomo Siswokatono, *Sri Mangkunagara IV: sebagai Penguasa dan Pujangga*, Semarang, 2006, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Wahyu Santoso Prabowo et al., *Sejarah Tari—Jejak Langkah Tari di Pura Mangkunegaran*, Surakarta, ISI press, 2007, p. 109.

cultivation.<sup>8</sup> The other one was that the construction of the *Mangkunegaran* government was reformed in 1867 and one section, named *Langenpraja*, specialized in managing artistic activities in the palace.<sup>9</sup> This section had the performers called *teledek*, who were women sing while dancing. By having *Langenpraja* and *teledek* in the organization, *Mangkunegaran* already had a foundation to receive *Langendriyan* from the common people and develop it into the notable art of *Mangkunegaran*.

Thus, we could say the genesis of *Langendriyan* was precipitated by a mixture of political and economic factors, the state of art and culture in the palace, the status of women, and *Mangkunegaran*'s tradition of being close to the common people.

Another important factor is that according to Sisiwokartono, for *Mangkunegaran*, around the time of creation of *Langendriyan*, the establishment of its own art styles (like the creation of this new dance drama) was one means of strengthening the social position of *Mangkunegaran* to elevate its status closer to other larger Javanese countries.<sup>10</sup> When the *Mataram* kingdom was divided into four parts, *Mangkunegaran* received much less land than two other larger countries. Also, it was not permitted to practice the *Mataram* ritual of succession, which includes the sacred dance, one of the symbols or treasures of king of *Mataram*.

### **Expression of *Langendriyan***

Now, I will analyze the expression of cross-gendered performance in *Langendriyan* from the following angles: performers (dancers), movement, costume, and makeup, and singing.

Generally, Javanese dance dramas were greatly influenced by the Javanese shadow puppetry play, and the pattern of distinguishing features of the characters in the play, like temperament, personality, and body shape, were traditionally established. For example, the villain's role has a large body and vulgar character. On the contrary, the hero has a thin figure, thin eyes, a slightly lowered head, a sophisticated and elegant character, and spiritual strength. In *Langendriyan*, a performer who suits the traditional characteristic of a certain role was chosen. In other words, *Langendriyan* has an appearance, which follows the traditional expression of the roles.

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<sup>8</sup> R. M. Mr. A. K. Pringgodigdo, *Geschiedenis der Ondernemingen van het Mangkoenagorische Rijk*, 'S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950, p. 45, also, Soetomo, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Soetomo, *op. cit.*, p. 146., also, Harmanto, *130 tahun Langen Praja Mangkunagaran*, 1997, pp. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> W.E. Soetomo Siswokartono, *Sri Mangkunagara IV: sebagai Penguasa dan Pujangga*, Semarang, 2006, pp. 246-247

Speaking of movement, in Javanese traditional dance there is a certain style for each character. There are three major styles which are the "female style," the "refined male style," and the "rough male style," and each style has an established position and way of moving. Accordingly, it is possible for an audience to understand the character from the movement, and not from the gender of the performer. This fact reveals why women can play male characters.

If that is the case, is there any difference in expression between male characters acted by men and male characters acted by women in *Langendriyan*? If we look carefully, there is a slight but definite difference, especially in the "rough male style." As for position of the body, there is not much difference. However, when they actually move, the impression given to an audience is very different because especially the width of movement side to side at the center of the body's stomach area, is very different. Because of this fact, a rough male character acted by a woman is often criticized for the expression of the rough character not being appropriate.

However, I judge the important point is that in *Langendriyan* the expression of the rough male character is not required to be so strong as when acted by a male performer. I myself studied the rough and villainous male character called *Menakjingga*, and when I was in training, my teacher often warned me "don't dance so strongly." Even the positions of arms and legs are in the "rough male style," but I was required to move in a relatively refined way. To be more precise, in *Langendriyan*, the expression required for a rough male character is not as strong as a traditional expression, but rather keeping the elegance and the beauty of woman are required. This is a distinguishing feature of the cross-gendered performance's esthetic expression in *Langendriyan*.

The costume is also stylized and helps to express the characters in the play. For example, the color red is mostly used for the characters with a rough and sharp temperament, and for the refined characters, blue and green are often used. The headdresses are also peculiar to most of the characters. I could say this style of the costumes is one of the tools for an audience to understand the characters in the play.

Looking from a cross-gender perspective, a noticeable point is the makeup, especially, the makeup for rough and villainous male characters. Usually in traditional Javanese dance, for the makeup for villainous male characters, red color is applied to the whole face and expresses roughness. However, for villainous male characters in *Langendriyan*, like *Menakjingga*, the makeup for a beautiful woman is used, and only the eyebrows are drawn slightly thick and sharp. From this fact, we can see that the performers of rough characters in *Langendriyan* are not trying to completely become

men, but rather acting as women, and acting like men is also not important. In this point, there is a linkage between the makeup and the movement.

Next is the song. Listening to the melodies of the song used in *Langendriyan*, we can hear the male characters and the female characters are singing in the same vocal range. It is hard to understand whether characters are a male or female by only listening to the song. From the aspect of song, there is not much differentiation between male characters and female characters in *Langendriyan*.

Now, I will summarize the expression of the cross-gendered performance in *Langendriyan*. Generally in Javanese traditional dance, the feature of each character is traditionally established from the influence of shadow puppetry play. The characters are expressed by stereotypical and differentiated "styles" of movement and costume. These "styles" can be considered as a reflection of Javanese traditional concepts of the difference between man and woman, mental habits, and fixed ideas as socially accepted ideas. Although the cross-gendered performance of the *Langendriyan* is valid because of the traditional "style," it does not totally follow the traditional "style" and use an ambiguous setting.

### **The effect of cross-gendered performance and relationship with the circumstances of the genesis of *Langendriyan***

What is the effect of cross-gendered performances on *Langendriyan* on the audience? I propose that the well-categorized, differentiated, and systematized cosmology of Javanese society is confused by the performance of *Langendriyan*. It is not only a matter of the style of a movement and makeup, but a view of the Javanese world, which also gets confused.

There is an important Javanese worldview, which is, "in the world, there is always conflict between good and evil and by keeping the balance between them, this world can exist. The forces of the evil are as important as the forces of the good and they cannot be lost." This is deeply reflected in the Javanese traditional dramas, and the conflicts, and battles between good and evil are often taken as materials. However, in *Langendriyan*, a beautiful woman acts an ugly villainous character. In other words, a reversal or inversion of the image occurs. By beautiful women playing ugly evil characters, the ugliness and evil of the characters are less emphasized, and the scene becomes peculiar and unpredictable. It gives the audience an interesting and different image that they have never experienced and can stimulate creativity. Also, the boundary gender that can be called "the third gender," which is the mixture of man and woman, but neither man nor woman, appears here.

A reversal phenomenon like cross-gendered performance can release restrictions. Also, by creative denial of the ordinary state in which a male character has to be manly, it can break fixed ideas, give a stimulus and tension to mental habit, and give a sort of confusion that makes an audience rethink traditional concepts.

In the performance of *Langendriyan*, the fixed image of the character which is expressed by traditionally established style of movements and costumes is inverted and reversed by the expression of cross-gender between performer and performed character. Furthermore, fixed social ideas, associated with styles, are inverted and reversed simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, for *Mangkunegaran*, the establishment of its own art styles, like the creation of this new dance drama, was one means of strengthening its social position. From this point of view, I propose that the creation, development, and performance of *Langendriyan* symbolically demonstrate *Mangkunegaran's* intent of reversing or inverting the well-systematized cosmology of the Javanese.

### **The influence on local community**

Then, what kind of influence did this dance drama have on the local community, especially the artistic community in the city of Surakarta? In Central Java, after the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, the territories of all royal families became properties of the Republic. The royal families lost most of their economic infrastructure and could not keep the position of patron of artistic activities. Many court artists left the courts, and after that *Langendriyan* was rarely performed in *Mangkunegaran* palace. After the nineteen seventies, *Langendriyan* started to be performed outside the palace with performers who do not have a relation with the palace. Mainly, it was included in the curriculum of the art high school and the art college in Surakarta. Also, new dance pieces were created based on or influenced by *Langendriyan* and had a favorable impact upon the other dance dramas. However, outside the palace, the fact of the rough evil character being played by a woman was not accepted. And far from that, it was criticized because it was not suited to the traditional expression of this certain character. Even more recently, I could see that realistic expressions in Javanese traditional dance have increased. In such a condition, we could say that expression in *Langendriyan* is peculiar. I have to say the cross-gendered performance in *Langendriyan* could only exist in the palace, not in a regular place so far.

### **Conclusion**

In the present Javanese society, due to the effect of globalization, the decline of the traditional arts is a matter of concern. However, there is a trend to reevaluate the local values and cultural heritage and it is reaching to a peak, and there is a high possibility that the importance of the expression of cross-gendered performance in *Langendriyan* shall be rediscovered in near future. It is possible that the free spirit of expression in *Langendriyan*, which is not a slave of established ideas, can stimulate the society, and becomes one of the guides of cultural creation in Javanese society in the future. From that point of view, I would like to closely examine the reception, the new interpretation, and the creative development of *Langendriyan* in Javanese society in the future.