

Contemporary Wayang Beber: Transformative Narration in the Discourse of Philosophy and Society



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ABSTRACT: Wayang Beber is one of Indonesia's cultural legacies. Wayang Beber, once a performance used for rituals, village cleansing, healing the sick, and special occasions in Java, has faced various setbacks in terms of presentation and has garnered less interest from certain segments of society. Data collection involved visiting contemporary Wayang Beber artists, conducting in-depth interviews, and observing contemporary Wayang Beber performances. The process involved summarizing and selecting key points, documenting, and focusing on important aspects of contemporary Wayang Beber performances in the modern era. Contemporary Wayang Beber revitalizes the traditional art form by reintroducing it through performing arts, incorporating dance, and collaborating with artists from Japan. The performances are simplified, shorter, and more entertaining, use modern lighting, feature new characters, and adapt stories that address current popular issues while retaining classic narratives. This research is significant as Wayang Beber is a cultural heritage that deserves to be reintroduced to the wider public. By doing so, the decline of Wayang Beber's performance can be prevented, ensuring its longevity and growth.

KEYWORDS: Wayang Beber; contemporary; performance art; drama and dance; philosophy; social context.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is rich in traditional arts, with each region possessing its unique cultural treasures. The art of wayang, a traditional form of performing arts, holds particular popularity and affection among the people of Bali due to its enduring presence. Wayang performances narrate history, and religion, and convey life's values, essential during Yadnya ceremonies and as entertainment for the Balinese community. Among the diverse array of wayang styles, there exists Wayang Beber, distinguished by its high aesthetic value and distinctive features. Like other wayang forms, Wayang Beber conveys symbolic depth and imparts moral teachings. Wayang Beber is a traditional Indonesian art where a long painted scroll tells stories while a person explains and shows the pictures. The stories are often about gods, heroes, and magical beings, and they teach lessons. This art is important for preserving culture and history. Skilled artists make the beautiful paintings on the scroll. It's like a moving picture book with someone talking about it. People are working to keep this art alive and teach it to new generations. However, this traditional art form, once an integral part of community life, now faces the threat of fading into oblivion. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Wayang Beber, but in the form of visual art, notably painting and performing art.

This interdisciplinary approach implies that researchers can have a richer and more multidimensional view of understanding performance and visual art; music as an art, art as color, and color as sound (Waskito & Karja, 2023). Wayang Beber is inseparable from its depictions on paper or cloth, acting as a visual aid for performances. Thus, the cultural legacy of Wayang Beber needs to be passed on to the younger generation to strengthen national identity and cultural resilience amidst the rapid onslaught of global influences. Wayang Beber, a form of wayang performance, employs illustrated images as its focal point. These images are sequentially painted on sheets of paper or cloth, with dimensions spanning one meter in width and four meters in length.

A distinctive instance of Wayang Beber hails from the Pengosekan district, presenting a slight variation through its collaboration with artists from Japan's Sakura nation. This strategic approach serves as a means to preserve and enhance Wayang Beber by introducing it to international audiences. During the performance, Wayang Beber is transformed into a drama and dance, combining the talents of artists such as I Made Jimat, Ni Nyoman Candri, and I Dewa Putu Rai as the composer. The story depicted in the Wayang Beber paintings is derived from the epic "Sutasoma," which teems with aesthetic, moral, religious, and philosophical values. These attributes serve as mirrors and guides for society, as Wayang embodies an invaluable facet of national identity. The artistic drama and dance rendition of Wayang Beber by these Pengosekan artists seamlessly intertwines various art forms, including painting, sound, literature, performance, and music. Hence, the aspiration is for the Wayang Beber performances in Pengosekan to rekindle interest in Wayang Beber across the archipelago, especially in Bali. By preserving Wayang Beber as a form of visual art, it is hoped that future generations will not only cherish but also experience and enjoy its legacy. The outcomes of this research hold great significance in addressing pertinent issues. By conserving Wayang Beber, this study aims to provide recommendations that

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mobilize relevant institutions, including government bodies, schools, and communities, to safeguard Wayang Beber as a treasured regional cultural asset.

This research distinguishes itself by its focus on collaborative efforts to preserve Wayang Beber, involving a global community, notably through collaboration with Japanese artists. This collaboration seeks to modernize Wayang Beber while retaining its distinctive regional elements and intrinsic aesthetic values. This study also sheds light on contemporary challenges stemming from the evolving times. The first area of exploration pertains to the unique facets of Contemporary Wayang Beber, encompassing its functions, character/style, and performance techniques. The second area probes the endeavors to salvage Wayang Beber from the brink of extinction.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach, generating descriptive findings through an exploratory study that is followed by actions tailored to developmental needs. The study is conducted in Banjar Pengosekan, Mas, Ubud, Gianyar, Bali, specifically in collaboration with a prominent artist, I Dewa Nyoman Apramada. Informants comprise representatives from various stakeholders, encompassing both governmental and private entities, such as the Wayang Beber painter himself and the traditional village head of Pengosekan, who is a retired visual arts teacher. Data collection involves interview techniques, observation, and literature review. Secondary data collection through this analysis (content analysis method) involves gathering relevant written documents associated with the research theme and comprehensively reviewing and assessing all documents about Wayang Beber. To ensure data validity, this study employs data source triangulation. Information gathered from one source is cross-referenced with different sources, comparing public statements with personal actions, contrasting observational data with interview data, and aligning interview results with document contents. Interviews are conducted with individuals involved in the development of contemporary Wayang Beber performances, including in-depth interviews with the Wayang Beber painter. Interviews also extend to several classical Wayang Beber experts, contemporary wayang experts, and other wayang practitioners. Direct observation is conducted during the creation of Wayang Beber and its contemporary performances. In this context, the character of Wayang Beber has evolved, involving a direct examination of the forms and characteristics of Wayang characters, as well as the roles of dancers in Wayang Beber presentations. Additionally, observations are made at the location of the Wayang Beber owner or artist, on May 7, 2023, at 7:00 PM. Data obtained from these observations serve as reference points for writing purposes. Documentation in the form of photos and videos is essential for data collection. Documentation includes various characters in contemporary Wayang Beber, the overall form of Wayang Beber, and aspects of the performances. This data collection technique complements the understanding of aesthetics inherent in each Wayang Beber, enabling readers to distinguish between classical and contemporary wayang. A literature review is conducted to seek books, theories, and prior research that contribute to addressing the identified research problems. The literature encompasses books, magazines, articles, and previous research deemed relevant for addressing the challenges of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on its origins, Wayang Beber is considered one of the legacies of the Majapahit Kingdom, as recounted by the thirteenth Wayang Beber puppeteer, Sumardi Gunautama. In the history of Indonesian puppetry, Wayang Beber is considered the precursor to shadow puppetry. The earliest form of puppetry in Indonesia was the stone puppet. This type of puppetry emerged long before the current form of puppetry evolved. While stone puppetry once flourished, it eventually waned as its enthusiasts shifted to other forms of performances. These other performance types are believed to have developed from stone puppetry but utilized different mediums. Following the decline of stone puppetry, a new form of puppetry emerged, involving painting on palm leaf manuscripts known as "lontar." Due to the use of palm leaves as the medium for painting or expression, this puppetry became known as "wayang lontar" (Warto et al., 2011).



Figure 1. Classic Wayang Beber showcases a scene of battle. Collection of Mangkunagaran Palace. (wikipedia.org 2022)

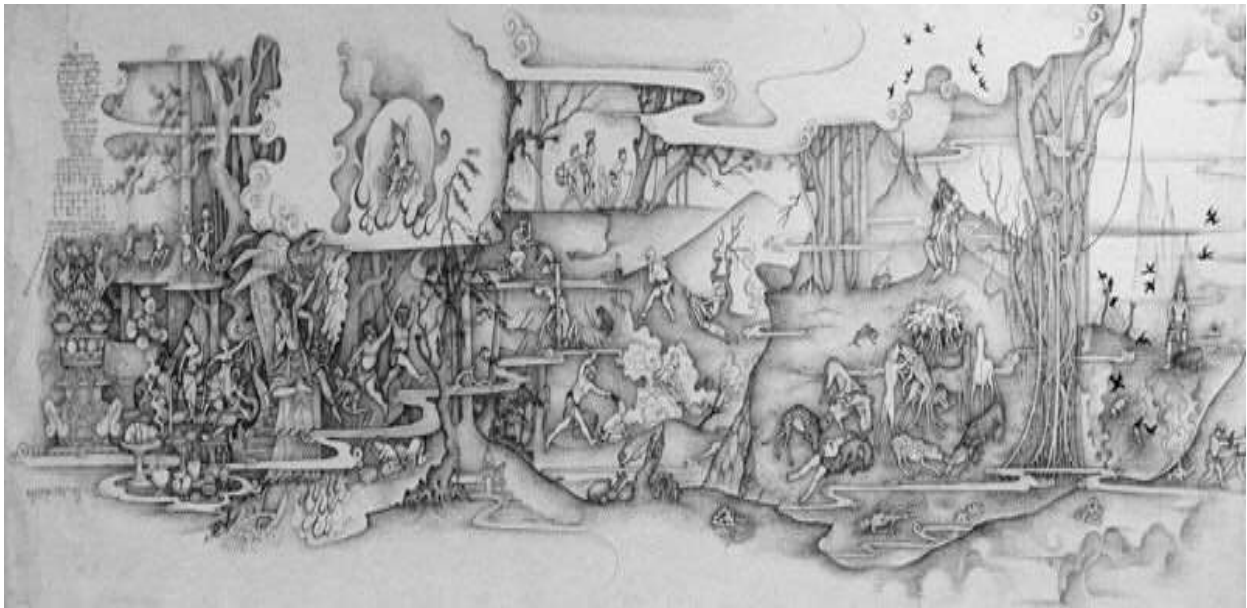


Figure 2. Contemporary Wayang Beber from Pengosekan, Ubud, Bali.



Figure 3. Contemporary Wayang Beber from Pengosekan, Ubud, Bali.

Two surviving versions of Wayang Beber exist today: the Pacitan version and the Wonosari version. Both versions revolve around the story of Panji, a legendary Javanese prince. The Pacitan version presents the story titled "*Joko Kembang Kuning*." According to R.M. Sayid, this narrative was created by Amangkurat II, categorizing it as a relatively recent Panji story. On the other hand, the Wonosari version showcases the story titled "*Remeng Mangunjoyo*." According to Poerbatjaraka, this narrative belongs to an older category of Panji stories. G.A.J. Hazeu suggests that this story represents an ancient Panji narrative. This implies that the Wayang Beber in Wonosari is older than the one in Pacitan. In its evolution, wayang lontar transitioned from being painted on palm leaves to being depicted on paper or cloth, as seen in contemporary Wayang Beber. Wayang Beber is a unique type of puppetry cherished by its enthusiasts. Unlike traditional leather-based puppets, Wayang Beber originally featured carvings on palm leaves, which were rolled and manipulated by the puppeteer during performances. Over time, these images were transferred onto white cloth using the *sungging* coloring technique for greater accessibility. Colors hold symbolic value in tradition. Bali has colors associated with cardinal directions and the light of the gods, these colors serve as the foundation of art and culture that develop within Bali's cosmology (Karja, 2020). Color is light and energy, colors are visible because they are reflected through various types of particles, molecules, and objects. There are diverse wavelengths that can be categorized as light. Each color has a specific frequency and vibration, which many people believe can contribute to specific qualities that influence energy within the human body (Karja, 2021). This transition marked a significant shift in the presentation of Wayang Beber. The use of cloth as a canvas offered greater flexibility and allowed for more intricate details in the visual narratives. As a result, Wayang Beber preserved its intricate aesthetics while adapting to the changing materials and techniques available, showcasing the dynamism and adaptability of Indonesian cultural heritage.



Figure 4. Wayang Beber Performance in Gunungkidul (circa 1902) at Dr. Wahidin's house in Yogyakarta. (Source: Tropenmuseum).



Figure 5. Contemporary Wayang Beber Performance

The research by Jamil et al. (2011) on the factors influencing the decline of traditional arts in Semarang concluded that three main factors contribute to the diminishing of traditional arts in the region: artists' involvement, public interest, and government policies. The decline in traditional arts is attributed to factors such as limited creativity, inadequate efforts in nurturing new talent, low interest in pursuing traditional artistry, and weak artistic management among the artists. Furthermore, the advancement of information technology and entertainment mediums like television and the internet, coupled with the lack of knowledge among the younger generation about traditional arts, has led to a decrease in interest in these traditional forms. Contemporary entertainment preferences of the younger generation, particularly digital games offered through the internet, phones, and electronic devices, have further diverted attention away from traditional arts. The insufficient dissemination of traditional arts among the younger generation has resulted in a shallow understanding of these art forms, which are rich with local wisdom and values.

Regional cultures that embody local wisdom typically exhibit certain characteristics. They can withstand foreign cultural influences, integrate elements of foreign culture, assimilate external cultural elements into their traditions, and guide the direction of cultural development. Local wisdom in societies can take various forms, including values, norms, ethics, beliefs, customs, customary law, and specific regulations. Therefore, its forms are diverse, serving multiple functions. For the people of Bali, local wisdom holds extensive meaning and functions within their lives. It serves as a means of conserving and preserving natural resources, contributes to human resource development through life-cycle ceremonies, and fosters cultural and scientific growth, such as in the Saraswati ceremony and reverence for the Panji temple. These functions encompass advice, beliefs, literature, and taboos. Socially, they serve purposes like communal and kinship integration ceremonies or agricultural cycle rituals. Ethical and moral dimensions are evident in rituals such as *Ngaben* (cremation) and ancestral spirit cleansing. Politically, they encompass ceremonies like *Nangkluk Merana* and patron-client power relationships (Sartini, 2004).

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The art of Wayang Beber is expressed on canvas by a traditional painter I Dewa Nyoman Apramada, hailing from Pengosekan and born on February 5, 1971. Apramada was born into an artistic family well-versed in dance, percussion, painting, and crafts, stemming from his parents Dewa Nyoman Sura and Jro Sroni. He inherited the artistic spirit genetically and self-taught through generations without any imposition. Apramada stands out as a traditional painter who uses only black and white in his unique artworks. The contemporary Wayang Beber in Banjar Pengosekan, Ubud, Bali, which is a modern interpretation of the classical wayang, emerged from the collective effort of artists to sustain public interest in wayang performances. This contemporary approach showcases a transformation in character style, variety, and storytelling. While classical wayang typically narrates tales of Panji, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, the Wayang Beber by I Dewa Nyoman Apramada possesses distinctiveness in terms of function, style, character, and presentation, while still adhering to the classic narrative of Sutasoma.



Figure 6. Dewa Nyoman Apramada

Kitab Sutasoma is a compilation of *kakawin* (a form of ancient Javanese poetry) composed by the renowned Javanese literary figure Mpu Tantular. The essence of Kitab Sutasoma revolves around promoting a spirit of religious tolerance, particularly between the Hindu and Buddhist communities coexisting during that era on the island of Java. In the 8th to 10th centuries AD, Hinduism (Shiva) and Mahayana Buddhism coexisted in the land of Java. King Udayana Warmadewa and Queen Mahendradatta was an important historical figure from Bali who played a significant role in enhancing Balinese civilization and culture in the fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism, as explained by historians I Ketut Ardhana and I Ketut Setiawan (2014) in their book, this information is also supported by Karja (2023).

The Wayang Beber performance in Banjar Pengosekan took place in 2009. After an interview with the painter, it was revealed that the ideas for the story emerged spontaneously, driven by a desire to revamp both the narrative and the painted characters. Wayang Beber possesses a unique charm where its illustrations are sequentially rolled and pulled by the puppeteer, allowing for improvisation during storytelling. Originally serving religious purposes like purification ceremonies and other communal rituals, contemporary Wayang Beber now functions as an art form for entertainment, catering to the enjoyment of the community.

Speaking of the aesthetic value within the Wayang Beber performance in Banjar Pengosekan, it is presented in the form of drama and dance with dialogues, songs, and movements specific to the portrayed characters or styles. This contemporary Wayang Beber maintains its distinctive characteristic by presenting illustrations that depart from the classical Wayang Beber style, instead opting for a more realistic and relatable depiction of everyday life. Preserving the art of Wayang Beber involves educating and enlightening the community about this traditional performance. Schools and educational institutions can incorporate lessons about the history, culture, and techniques of creating Wayang Beber illustrations for students. Technological advancements can play a significant role in promoting and introducing Wayang Beber art globally. For instance, producing documentary films about this performance or developing virtual reality applications allowing users to experience Wayang Beber in 3D format. This approach allows global audiences to appreciate Wayang Beber as a captivating aspect of Indonesian cultural tourism.

Similarly, the contemporary rendition of Wayang Beber engages in collaboration, featuring Japanese artists as characters like Purusadha and involving iconic figures such as I Made Jimat as Sutasoma, along with the participation of prominent female puppeteer, Ni Nyoman Candri, as a singer. This drama and dance performance showcases direct interactions between dancers, eliminating the traditional role of the puppeteer. This innovative approach contributes to the preservation and international exposure

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of Wayang Beber as a cultural tourism attraction. During each cycle of religious holidays, especially on the auspicious day, *tumpek wayang* ceremony, artists offer special ceremonies or offerings to honor and purify the puppetry, crown, and other dance equipment (Kusuma & Karja, 2023).



Figure 7 and 8. Contemporary Wayang Beber Performance from Pengosekan, Ubud, Bali.

In the teachings of Hinduism, the philosophical values embedded within contemporary Wayang Beber carry the motto of "*Bhineka Tunggal Ika Tan Hana Dharma Mangruwa*," which signifies the unity of diverse paths and the absence of two conflicting Dharmas (religions), particularly symbolizing the harmonization of Shiva and Buddha teachings. This highlights the essence of life's values, emphasizing religious tolerance, especially between Buddhism and Hinduism. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, "*Rwaneka dhatu winuwus Buddha Wiswa Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Siwatatwa tunggal Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangruwa*." It is said that Buddha and Shiva are two distinct entities. Indeed, they may differ, but how can they be recognized? For the truth of Jina (Buddha) and Shiva is singular. The stanza above is a quote from the Kakawin Sutasoma, specifically in Canto 139, stanza 5. These words are also used in our nation's founding motto, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" (Unity in Diversity). This stanza conveys that the differences between Buddha and Shiva should not hinder mutual respect. The truth of Buddha and Shiva is unified. The cantos within the Sutasoma text are closely related to interdisciplinary semiotics. Moreover, the social interdisciplinary aspects found in Contemporary Wayang Beber include the value of cultural and social unity. The book Sutasoma explicitly expresses "*Bhineka Tunggal*

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Ika Tan Hana Dharma Mangrwa, "portraying a sense of unity and solidarity in the Indonesian nation during the Hindu-Buddhist period.

CONCLUSION

In the rich tapestry of Indonesian culture, Wayang Beber stands as a treasured gem, woven with threads of history, culture, and artistry. This traditional performing art is a captivating journey where intricately crafted images, unfurled and animated by the skilled hands of a puppeteer, weave tales of epic proportions – stories that echo through time, encompassing legends, myths, and the tapestry of history itself. However, like a fading masterpiece, the radiant allure of Wayang Beber is gradually dimming, eclipsed by the rise of modern entertainment forms. Dewa Nyoman Apramada's contemporary rendition of Wayang Beber shines brightly amidst this transition. His artistic vision has given birth to a distinct form, one that embraces the role of entertainment, embracing a more vivid and realistic portrayal of characters and scenes. Moreover, the infusion of drama and dance, where performers directly engage in dialogue, adds a dynamic layer, replacing the solitary voice of the puppeteer with a harmonious interplay of movements and words. Yet, amid this evolving landscape, the imminent threat of Wayang Beber's fading resonance looms large. Thus, the call to action is clear – a collective effort is essential to ensure the survival of this cultural masterpiece, allowing it to endure and be cherished by generations to come. A symphony of support from governmental bodies, communities, and technological advancements can serve as a steadfast guardian, ushering Wayang Beber beyond local boundaries, introducing it to a global stage, and ensuring that its enchanting melodies resonate far and wide. In doing so, the legacy of Wayang Beber can transcend the confines of time, keeping alive the spirit of unity, artistry, and cultural heritage that it embodies.

The exploration and study of Wayang Beber, particularly its contemporary iteration by Dewa Nyoman Apramada, offers a valuable contribution to the academic world across several dimensions: Investigating the evolution of Wayang Beber from its traditional roots to the contemporary form contributes to the documentation and preservation of Indonesian cultural heritage. By delving into the adaptations and innovations introduced by artists like Apramada, researchers can shed light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, offering insights into how cultural expressions evolve while retaining their essence. Analyzing Apramada's creative reinterpretation of Wayang Beber provides an opportunity to explore the boundaries of artistic expression within a traditional framework. Researchers can dissect the stylistic choices, narrative modifications, and incorporation of drama and dance to understand how artists engage with and reshape established art forms, thus expanding our understanding of artistic evolution. Interdisciplinary Studies, Wayang Beber's connection with various disciplines, including literature, performance studies, anthropology, and semiotics, opens avenues for interdisciplinary exploration. Scholars can delve into how Wayang Beber reflects sociocultural dynamics, religious symbolism, and historical narratives, fostering a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted significance. Investigating collaborations between artists from different cultural backgrounds, such as the collaboration with Japanese artists, offers insights into the cross-cultural influences and global resonance of traditional art forms. This contributes to discussions about how cultural exchange impacts artistic creation and how traditional art can find relevance in a globalized world. The study of Wayang Beber, especially when paired with contemporary pedagogical approaches, can be integrated into educational curricula to engage students in the exploration of cultural diversity, creativity, and historical narratives.

This application extends beyond academia, fostering cultural appreciation and understanding among future generations. Safeguarding cultural legacies, by researching and disseminating knowledge about Wayang Beber, academics play a pivotal role in ensuring the preservation of this art form. This contribution extends to awareness campaigns, policy recommendations, and collaborative efforts aimed at safeguarding traditional cultural practices in the face of modernization. In sum, the study of Wayang Beber's contemporary transformation contributes to the academic world by bridging the past and present, unraveling intricate cultural narratives, illuminating the boundaries of artistic innovation, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, facilitating cross-cultural understanding, and advocating for the preservation of cultural treasures for generations to come.

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