The Meaning Behind Rites
Symbolical Aspect of the Ngaruat Tradition with Cerita Batara Kala

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Abstract: One of the folklore forms of Tatar Sunda which is related to religious ceremonies is Ngaruat Tradition (NT) using Cerita Batara Kala (CBK). In the past, this tradition had an important role for the Sundanese. Along with the advancement of the era, especially religion, the function and role of NT in the society was fading. It is possible that in the future this tradition will vanish. As a cultural product that used to have a significant role, NT possess hidden and beneficial essential values. Therefore, this study aims to preserve the nation’s cultural product by revealing the values contained in the product. Using the qualitative method, this study merged two interrelated things, namely NT and CBK, since most of the existing studies only focused on CBK or NT. The results revealed that the traditions described in CBK and NT are symbols of Sundanese values and views of life as follows: (1) humans as individuals; (2) humans relations with nature; (3) humans relations with their social environment; (4) humans relations with God, and (5) humans and their desire to pursue inner satisfaction. These results are expected to give a contribution in enriching studies about the tradition comprehensively. Semiotic approach was used to acquire results in the form of cultural values that could be used to strengthen the identity and character of the nation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Folklore is a part of culture that can be in the form of people’s speech, traditional expressions like proverbs, riddles, prose like mite, legend, and tales (including anecdotes and jokes), folk song and music, theatre, games, beliefs, architectures, fine arts and paintings, gestures, and so on. Folklore can be used as an object to analyse the collective behaviours (mind set) of the supporters because it has the functions as: 1) projection system, 2) cultural ratification, 3) pedagogy, and 4)forcer of the enactment of community norms and control. Folklore also functions to strengthen the nation’s identity and develop the local tourism (Bascom, 1965).

One of the forms of folklore (verbal tradition) in Tatar Sunda which is related to religious ceremonies and explored in this paper is ngaruat tradition (NT). In the past, this tradition had an important role in Sundanese people’s lives which was identified with the existence of some vocabularies or terms related to ngaruat ceremony and the vocabularies and terms are still verbally transmitted among the society. Seniors in nowadays’ villages still address the word sandekala if they prohibit their children to go outside during Magrib; even though they (perhaps) do not particularly understand the meaning behind the prohibited action. In correlation with the ngaruat tradition, one of the types of people that needs to be ruat-ed is the ones that travel during sunset (dusk). Based on the sound and literal meaning, the word sandekala refers to Batara Kala, a central character in NT. There are other things which are related to NT and uttered in the life of the society in Tatar Sunda today. The word sandekala, which used to be expressed by the Sundanese, derives from the Sanskrit word sandhyakala which means ‘twilight’ or ‘dusk’. The connection between sandekala and ngaruat tradition is that someone who must be ruat –ed is someone who travels when the sun sets (at dusk). The word sandekala refers to Batara Kala, the central character of NT.

The word ruat is one of lemmas in KBBI that is derived from Kawi Language which means ‘detached’ or ‘free’; rumuwat or mangruwat means...
attenuating, releasing, freeing, or eliminating. A word that is closely related to the word ruwat which is sukerta (someone who must be ruat-ed). The word sukerta appears in some Old Javanese texts, including Hariwangs, Sumanasantaka, Koruwarsrama, Nawaruci, and Sudamala stories. From the word sukerta which appear in the tales, the terms bocah sukerta and wong sukerta emerge. That is why, at the period of time when bocah sukerta circumcised or married, the occasion was celebrated with a wayang show which performed overnight and told the story of Murwakala (Soebalidinata, 1984) or CBK.

As the era advanced, NT and CBK will someday be forgotten. This is the reason why this study aims to: 1) document the components the oral forms of NT, 2) inventory NT devices, 3) reveal the implicit meaning, and 4) seek for the alternative way of socializing CBK as an interesting literary work.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This study used qualitative method which tries to comprehend and interpret the meaning of an event or human interaction in a particular situation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The data collection was through literature and field studies in various libraries and places where NT and CBK could still be found. Through in-depth and open interviews, the data were gathered from traditional figures, puppetry artists, and those who had experience or were familiar with NT and CBK. In addition, the data were also collected by recording an ngaruat ceremony with CBK. The data were reduced by abstracting and arranging them in units, and then categorization and coding were conducted. The data analysis was finished by checking the data validity and interpreting it according to the semiotic approach.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ngaruat tradition (NT) is actually an effort to refuse misfortunes for the sake of achieving salvation and prosperity in leading a life. At least, that is what Peursen and Hartoko (2000) state that ceremonies from primitive tribes do not only function to repel dangers, but also to console each other; also as a preparation so that they can withstand adversities, such as plagues, dry season, and many more. Ruatan ceremony are hybrid, a mix; meaning that basic myth about a classification of two elements, which underlies all wayang play that has been mixed with foreign elements. In this case, wayang play as a rite of affirmation towards ancestors’ myths is mixed with ngaruat ceremony for its own purposes.

3.1 Ngaruat Tradition with Cerita Batara Kala

Ngaruat tradition (NT), whether in Sunda or Java, is not only meant for humans. It can also be used to ngaruat a place. The difference between ngaruat someone (sukerta) and ngaruat a place is the story performed for the ceremony: Cerita Batara Kala (CBK) or Murwakala is meant for ngaruat people, whereas Babad Alas Amer and Bumi Loka is meant for ngaruat a place. However, if sukerta’s characteristic and group are observed, ngaruat ceremony performed for a place is essentially meant for people; the example is what Rosana (1964) says to a sukerta on number 32, “People who, without ethics, clear rice paddy fields, lands, places, and forests; as well as establish buildings, houses, barns, and sheds; are called Kalaamer”. In relation, in ngaruat a place, still uses CBK at the end of the ceremony.

CBK is a story in puppetry (pewayangan) which is specially performed in ngaruat ceremony; in NT in Java, this story is known with Murwakala as the title and performed using shadow puppets (wayang kulit) as the medium. Ngaruat tradition is Sundanese’ life is generally conducted by performing CBK through a puppet show (wayang golek). However, in some places, there are also people who perform this story through art performance of wayang pantun, pantun, and beluk without reducing the sacred nature of the ritual. In Majalengka; as an instance, besides using a shadow puppet show, ngaruat ceremony is also performed through pantun and/or gaok (another term for beluk) show. According to several puppet masters and locals, these performances are done to simplify the requirements in order to ease those who are incapable of paying a wayang group.

The aforementioned simplification of ngaruat ceremony is not only in terms of the performance media, but also in terms of the requirement such as offerings and a series of rituals.

3.2 Ngaruat Tradition with Cerita Batara Kala

There are five components that (must) be present in NT, they are Sukerta, CBK as the medium, a
storyteller, requirement/offerings, and/or mantra/rajah.

Ngaruat or misfortune repellant is necessary for people who are considered as sukerta, which is people who need to be ruat-ed as an obligatory based on the status of the child in the family, physical deficiencies, and people who make a mistake in doing some particular jobs. Based on written data, people who must be ruat-ed or sukertas is divided into three types consisting of four groups based on: 1) birth processes (20 types), 2) physical deficiencies (16 types), 3) relationships with siblings and other family members (29 types); and 4) actions (58 types). Some of the examples are; twins (sons and daughters), dampit (a son and a daughter, quadruplets), anak Sapar (a child who is born on Sapar month), and so on.

The story that needs to be performed is CBK through a shadow puppet show, which then develops into a wayang golek, wayang pantun, carita pantun, and beluk shows. The election of the medium for this ceremony is based on the (economic) capabilities of the organizer of ngaruat ceremony. As for the storyteller who tells CBK in three different shows is puppet masters (dalang), juru pantun, and the leader of a wawacan (a long story which is composed with canto (pupuh) rules) manuscripts reading group.

As one of the sacred ritual traditions, ngaruat has absolute rules which cannot be taken for granted; starting from the procedures/ethics during the ceremony, the responsibility of the audiences, to the requirements that need to be provided by the hosts of the ceremony. The requirements are offerings (sasajen) and accessory (rarangken) which have to be provided during the ngaruat ceremony and includes: 13 types of food/drinks, 14 types of groceries, 9 types of waters, 5 types of dressings and accessories, 14 types of plants/leaves, 6 types of tools/furniture, and 5 types of special equipment.

Besides offerings and show equipment for ngaruat ceremony, in wayang show, there are also several steps that need to be done including reading/reciting kidung or rajah by the puppet master which is intended for Batara character. The mantra (rajah/kidung) is a symbol of cleansing which is meant for eliminating every misfortune which exist inside the sukerta.

### 3.3 Ritual Process

The complete ritual process starts with a presentation of sasajen (offerings) in front of the venue (wayang, pantun, beluk). The sukertas seat around the venue or near sasajen wearing a white fabric (ihrom). Then, dalang (puppet master) starts telling Cerita Batara Kala which includes the reading of rajah/kidung intended for (the body of) wayang Batara Kala. During that time, wayang Batara Kala is veiled with white fabric. After the play finished, dalang chants a mantra to the sukerta’s body/nape and then bathe him/her by pouring the sukerta’s head with flower water. When being bathed, sukerta wears usual clothing veiled with white fabric. After that, all the clothing used during ngaruat ceremony must be disposed or submitted to dalang. Also, all offerings have to be submitted to dalang.

Ngaruat ceremony through wayang (CBK) starts during midnight or predawn and must be finished before daybreak. During the Batara Kala play, there are some rules for the audience including prohibition to go home or leave the venue before the story is finished and prohibition to not going to sleep or feel sleepy. The mythical reason is that if someone goes home in the middle of the show, they will be eaten by Batara Kala on the way’. Some opinions, says that it is meant for all attendees’ sake, so that they can enjoy the whole story in the show. Furthermore, the reason is that everyone can recite prayers presented in the mantra or kidung/rajah.

### 3.4 Symbolic Meanings

Humans use language, clothing, ideas, moral values, and life norms; all of them are the product of symbolized behaviors. In this case, symbols can be defined as expressions of wisdom, born and applied in daily life of a particular society.

As a generally traditional society, Tatar Sunda’s society (especially in the past) also has traditional wisdom applied in their daily lives, for example taboos or prohibitions. Prohibition or taboo is sometimes disclosed in the forms of idioms. These prohibitions have particular positive purposes and aims, but they are not delivered in transparency. One of the ritual traditions loaded with symbols and/or traditional wisdoms is NT which has these following implicit meanings:

#### 3.4.1 Ngaruat

Ngaruat: Possess meanings of releasing, eliminating, and/or getting rid of something bad/evil from within humans. There is an opinion that phonetically, ngaruat is identical with the word ngarawat (merawat); which means taking care of.
All meanings contained in the term *ngaruat* refer to its purpose for achieving life salvation.

### 3.4.2 Sukerta

Sukerta which consists of four groups is considered as a misfortunate person so that his/her life is threatened by disastrous matters. Accordingly, misfortunes have to be released or eliminated from within him/herself so that his/her life is safe and prosperous. If it is explored or analyzed thoroughly, these four groups have psychological problems in their life so that their life journeys do not run smoothly or normally. Thus, NT is a traditional psychotherapy used by people in the past so that the sukertas can lead a fair life.

### 3.4.3 Cerita Batara Kala

*Cerita Batara Kala*: The central character of this act is *Batara Kala*, son of *Batara Guru* (from Dewi Tanana and/or Dewi Uma), who is born unexpectedly due to *Batara Guru*’s irrepressible lust. *Batara Kala* has a malicious character and is fond of consuming human flesh. This can be a lesson for people that having an intercourse cannot be done with a random person and even though it is done with one’s own wife, it still needs to be done ethically by considering the place and time.

Like the other wayang characters which are symbolized by physical appearance (color, head and eye gestures, and so on), *Batara Kala*’s figure, which can be considered as a giant, is enough to indicate greedy, fierce/evil, and voracious.

The word *kala* derives from Sanskrit which means *time*; this term *kala* also implies a meaning that humans need to remember about time and has to make use of time for positive things so that their lives are always in salvation. Storyteller or *dalang* (puppeteer) as the symbol of Life’s most sovereign.

### 3.4.4 Ruatan Equipment and Offerings

*Ruatan* Equipment and Offerings: Essentially, the function of offerings is to be a means or something that bonds the importance of food, household furniture, farming tools, plants, pets, vegetation, and so on. The presence of offerings reminds humans that, essentially, humans’ life is inseparable with their natural surroundings as a means to undergo their daily lives.

Another thing that needs to be explored concerning the offerings is terms or vocabularies of the offerings. In the group of plants, there is a *jukut palias* and *sulangkar*. In Sundanese, *palias* means *amit-amit* or “God forbid”; this word is used to refer to something gross, scary; so that no one would want to do or experience it. *Palias* plant can be an ointment (*lulur*) after being pulverized.

There is also a term called *kapalaisian* which means a mantra to repel misfortunes. Meanwhile, *sulangkar* is an acronym of *sulaya* and *ingkar*, both of them mean that human, when leading their life, cannot break/escape from norms. Regarding the *sulangkar* plant, this plant (perhaps) scientifically possesses a property that can be made use of by humans because our ancestors has decided to make the plant as an offering and they could not be reckless about it, instead they chose it with a clear significance. This supposition has to be proven by laboratory tests to *sulangkar* plant. In the food group, there is a *ketupat* (a type of dumpling made from rice packed inside a diamond-shaped container of woven palm leaf pouch) named *kupat salamet* and *kupat tangtang angin*; linguistically, it is clear that these *ketupat* dishes are prayers of salvation (*salamet*) and antidotes of dangers symbolized by the words *tangtang angin* (challenging the wind). Likewise, offerings in the water group consist of water taken from the river and it is called *cai mulang*. River is a symbol of human life which runs like a river flowing through the creek, a final destination (*mulang*). Water is a symbol for humans to make meaning of, especially for the ones that need to be *ruat*-ed.

### 3.4.5 Ruatan Mantra or Rajah/Kidung

*Ruatan Mantra* or Rajah/Kidung: Reciting this mantra is a symbol in releasing and banishing the misfortunes inside the sukerta’s body so that he/she can be pure from all the things that block salvation. *Batara Kala*’s body is actually the symbol of all body limbs of someone that is being *ruat*-ed at that time. Rajah/kidung in *ngaruat* ceremony also means: apologies to the God for all the mistakes, prayers for salvation in leading a life, and casting out entities that disturb human’s life.

From the discussion regarding the components and structure of *ngaruat* with CBK, it was revealed that the tradition is a symbol of Sundanese values and views of life which consist of: (1) humans as individuals (symbolized by the ego of *Batara Kala* character); (2) humans with nature (symbolized by the offerings); (3) humans with their social environment (symbolized by the clothing and taboos); (4) humans with God (symbolized by the presence of *dalang* or puppet master and special equipment), and (5) humans and their desire to
pursue inner satisfaction (symbolized by the mantra/kidung).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Ngaruat Tradition (NT) is also a product of the development of a culture that shows a variety of steps in Indonesian culture; and has a silver lining between each step. Ceremonially, ngaruat ceremony is oftentimes conducted during cultural events, nowadays. Even though there have been many changes, in the frame of preserving the culture, this is a chance to preserve and develop NT as a product of a culture which is useful for science and society as:

- Source of research for a study of: local languages (including dictionary making), literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology, ethics/morality, religious systems, arts, and history of the development of culture;
- Source in humanities education;
- The result of the study towards components of NT probably can be revitalized for the sake of empowerment of people’s economy, for example to become one of the packaging (model) of cultural product for the benefit of tourism.

REFERENCES