

Art Festival and the Revival of Tradition in the Post-reform Era of Indonesia

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Abstract: The political crisis in 1998 had created feelings of anxiety and fears for Indonesians people including artists and cultural activists. When many people remained their feelings unspoken because of high political pressure, artists and poets in West Java channelled their feelings through artistic works. Nyiar Lumar festival in Ciamis, West Java, is a biennial event created in this situation for the first time in 1998. Later, it becomes one of the biggest festivals in West Java as it has attracted thousands of people attending the series of art activities in the long day activity. Not only succeeded in creating outstanding artistic work, but also Nyiar Lumar has become a symbolic work that brought its audiences into new 'myths' of historical, political, and cultural glory of Sundanese in the past. Located in a historical site of old Sundanese Kingdom, Astana Gede, Ciamis, Nyiar Lumar uses traditional and natural artistic elements representing old symbols that have conveyed the Sundanese audience to celebrating their cultural glory in the past. Besides, the festival is also a medium for the youth to learn their tradition. This means the festival is a bridge for transmitting Sundanese tradition and its values to the younger generation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Art festivals, according to Waterman, are cultural commodities in which culture is contested (1998: 55). As a country with cultural diversity, art festivals in Indonesia are about celebrating cultural identity expressed in ritual practices and tradition including religious celebration, harvest festivals, sea festivals, carnivals or street festivals. They are cultural commodities on one hand, yet they are cultural identity formation on the other. Each year many art festivals are held in a variety of events across the archipelago, both old practices and new-created forms. Festivals are ubiquitous. Some of them were emerged and created in the post-reform era following the vibrant of the revival of tradition as a result of political change of the country in which decentralisation policy demand uniqueness of locality in each region of Indonesia (see Lahpan, 2015). Thus, festivals as a cultural attraction are placed as an important facet of the locality which significantly expresses cultural identity.

In West Java, art festivals are also salient in public spaces. One of them is Nyiar Lumar festival. Nyiar Lumar was born during the political crises in 1998, located in Ciamis, West Java, as a response to the political situation at that time. The event was initiated by the small circle of a theatre group called Teater Jagat, a group from a senior high school, SMAN 1 Kawali, Ciamis. Further, this initiative got a lot of support from Sundanese artists, poets, and cultural activists in Ciamis in particular, and West Java in general.

Political crises in 1998 had stimulated fear and anxiety in social life among society by which the most obvious movement is students' demonstration in almost every city in Indonesia, including in Bandung. Meanwhile, in a small town like Ciamis regency, some artists, poets and cultural activists chose to go to the isolated place of the historical and sacred forest (Sundanese: leuweung karamat or tabet) called Astana Gede in Kawali, where inscriptions of old Sundanese Kingdom, Galuh Kingdom sited. They spent days to get together for informal conversations and expressed artistic works through poetry reading. Further, they planned to create art performance to

express their unease feelings of political tense through artistic works, especially by reading poem and theatre performance which later named after “Nyar Lumar”.

“Nyar” means “looking for” and “lumar” is a kind of mushroom grown in the forest by which it is luminous in the darkness. Literally, it means “looking for bright mushroom”. This mushroom could beautifully illuminate the dark night in the forest by its glowing light. The philosophical meaning of the words is that people should always find the light through the darkness in their life (interview with Suwarna, 4 May 2019).

After a short preparation, they held the first Nyar Lumar on 20 Mei 1998 amid the very high tense of the political state. At the same time, unexpected audiences came from Bandung and Tasikmalaya to attend the event. They were university students and artists who got information through words of mouth. They left Bandung and joined the event in Ciamis after participated in the big demonstration of May 1998.

In the tense political situation, security officers from the military army of Ciamis branch warned them not to make the performance as a political action. If there were a political statement such as appeal to Suharto to step down from his presidency, the crowd would be arrested by a military officer. Performance activity was surrounded by this tense and unpleasant situation yet they continued the performance until dawn. In this particular circumstance, the performance is undeniably a political statement in artistic form despite there was not a specific statement about Suharto’s step down.

Besides an artistic form, Nyar Lumar is also singular because of its distinctiveness in its venue in the sacred forest with full of mythical elements and the stories created to tell through performance by which the story is highly political, that is about the Bubat war, one of the controversial stories in Sundanese history. This event has inspired Godi Suwarna, one of the founders of Nyar Lumar, to write down the Sundanese novel based on this place, entitled Sandekala (1998) as we will discuss later.

This paper explores the meaning of art festival in relation to the vibrant of the revival of tradition and celebrating local identity in the post-reform era, by taking the Nyar Lumar festival in Ciamis regency as a case study. The data were collected through observations and interviews during October 2018-April 2019.

Despite their ubiquitous, art festivals are almost neglected in the scholarship. In fact, the festival does not something that stands alone as artistic forms. It is

intersected with various factors of interests including politics, economy, ideology, and cultural expression itself. In relation to this, Waterman (1998) discusses art festivals as intertwined interests between cultural politics, industry and art expression. Here, the festival is defined and controlled by stakeholders including the government, industries, and others. It is also the destination culture of tourism. In its wider impact, the festival is not just a ceremony or event, it is a place to sound a political choice of silenced voices and to strengthen a community bound (Fernandez, 2006). This is also we found in our research of Nyar Lumar festival.

2 “NYIAR LUMAR” AS A SYMBOLIC POWER OF TRADITION

Shortly after its first debut in 1998, Nyar Lumar got wide attention from audiences across West Java, even later national and international audiences came to the event. The latest festival was held in October 2018 as the tenth festival in 20 years (1998-2018). It was the biggest event ever. There are several reasons why this festival got big attention from various groups of audiences hence it is unique and special, as we shall discuss below.

The unique characteristics of Nyar Lumar compared to other festivals are its choices of very local vocabularies in presenting the concept of the festival. When other festivals choose a contemporary form to make it attractive, or a combination of traditional and contemporary, Nyar Lumar completely uses old, traditional and local symbols. First, the main event of the festival held at night started after isya around 8 pm until dawn; second, as a night event, it needs light and it uses the traditional light from bamboo called “obor” (Indonesian) or “oncor” (Sundanese). It is a torch made from bamboo with a wick burned by liquid fuel in the middle. This obor becomes the most prominent symbols of the festival as it needs hundreds of obor to light up the whole series of event. In the last festival in 2018, they need 1000 obor. Third, the choice of the place for the event in a sacred forest of Old Sundanese Kingdom makes this festival even has more symbolic power of tradition. This is complemented by the concept of performance which only performs traditional performance: traditional music, theatre and dance.

The iconic traditional dance at the peak of the event is Ronggeng Gunung with the only old lady dancer left named Bi Raspi who comes from a very

remote area of Pangandaran regency. It is played around 3 o'clock in the morning until dawn. The characteristic of Ronggeng Gunung fits with the distinctive feature of Nyiar Lumar. Ronggeng Gunung is nearly extinct Sundanese traditional performance. It is a dancing played by singing with the unique voice of Bi Raspi. Meanwhile, dancing movement is very simple with a particular pattern so everyone among the audience could follow. Bi Raspi as the star was dancing in the middle of the open stage on the ground as commonly found in a traditional performance. Afterwards, some men dancers wore a sarong and headband dancing in a circle in clockwise around her (Nopianti, 2014: 85). In the long run, anyone in the audience could join the dance. This is to be done during the rest of the night until dawn. The close interaction between dancer and audience as found in Ronggeng Gunung, following Turino (1998), called a participatory performance by which there is no distance between performers and audience. This participatory performance is common in a traditional performance. Art performance is not enjoyed from distance, but it needs involvement, proximity, and plays together.

Series of the event in Nyiar Lumar includes several stages: 1) introduction session (ngawalan) consist of seminar series, cultural dialogue, and street festivals during the day; 2) walking activity (lalampahan) by tracking down the particular route from the local city square to the sacred place of Astana Gede site started from around 7 pm to 8 pm; and 3) the main event, the performances (magelaran) started from around 8 pm in the main stage, in front of Astana Gede and continued to perform inside the forest which mostly performed old art forms (seni buhun) and poetry reading. The several stages of the festival were closed by two main performances, theatre performance of Palagan Bubad and Ronggeng Gunung dance.

There are several aspects in the Nyiar Lumar festival considered a powerful symbol of tradition. To interpret these symbols we follow Peircian semiotic approach with his concepts of icon, index, and symbol (Turino, 1997; Lahpan, 2015). Semiotics is a valuable tool for tracing the life signs in situated society since it enables us to grasp the situated meanings of sign (Geertz, 1973). For this particular approach, Geertz suggests.

If we are to have a semiotic of art... we are going to have to engage in a kind of natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning. ... meaning in use, or more carefully, arise from use...an investigation of signs in their natural habitat... (1973:118-119).

Following this, the interpretation of main signs in Nyiar Lumar brings the audience to old, historical and powerful symbols of the past about the Sundanese kingdom, as symbolised in a place where the festival takes place, a sacred site of Astana Gede Kawali where the Sundanese kingdom resided.

Astana Gede site is a historical place of the oldest Sundanese Kingdom, Galuh surrounded by myths and stories of Sundanese ancestors, especially the epic story of Palagan Bubad or Bubad war. Not only historical, but this story also has a symbolic power of glory in the past for Sundanese. Palagan Bubad is a story about the most tragical war between the Sundanese Kingdom and Majapahit where the Princess of Sundanese Kingdom killed.

According to Suwarna (63 years old), the story of Palagan Bubad performed in Nyiar Lumar has evoked new interest among young students and artists to learn the history of the Sundanese. They read together some history books about Sundanese, including Yoseph Iskandar's novel. Palagan Bubad is a story about the heroic princess of the Sundanese kingdom, Prabu Maharaja, named Dewi Citraresmi or popularly known as Dyah Pitaloka. She sacrificed herself by taking her own life when the king of Majapahit, Hayam Wuruk, wanted to marry her as a symbol of the mastery of Majapahit to the Sundanese kingdom. This refusal had caused the attack to the Sundanese kingdom troupe that accompanied the princess including her parents in a place called Bubad, in Majapahit area. After all the troupes were killed, the princess finally killed herself. She becomes symbols of pride and loyalty to her motherland, the Sundanese Empire, and a determination not to surrender to the mastery of Majapahit (Ekadjati, 2006: 31-39).

In this historical context, the story of Bubad is index, in Peircian term, for the Sundanese heroes in defending the motherland from the mastery of others. It is the spirit of freedom and the refusal of colonialism although the kingdom was defeated. The death, as symbolised by Dyah Pitaloka, is more honoured than giving up the life under other's mastery. Meanwhile, the site of Astana Gede that is believed as a place where the Sundanese Kingdom resided is an icon for the glory of the Sundanese ancestor. It was a place where the symbolic hero of Dyah Pitaloka was born. Moreover, with its symbolic power of tradition, Nyiar Lumar has become a symbol of Sundanese history in which the Sundanese people could refer their story, their identity to this particular event.

3 NYIAR LUMAR FESTIVAL AND THE TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION

After 20 years, Nyiar Lumar festival has shown the continuity of the process of transmission of tradition among the younger generation to learn the Sundanese tradition and its art forms. Those who involved in the festival are mostly young people as the festival itself initiated by young community artist in Ciamis. Artists and organisers of the festival are mostly from a university and senior high school students.

Hundreds of students, artists and communities involved in this event performing a variety of performance forms including a dance studio, Studio Titik Dua, that consist of young children. In 2018, at least there were twenty groups of traditional performances involved in the event. Among them are rare and unique art forms, such as Bebegig, exclusive traditional art from Ciamis. Furthermore, for twenty years, the audiences coming from different cities in West Java as well as the communities in Ciamis always looks forward to the event. They are loyal audiences who don't miss attending the event. This biennial event is worth awaited-event for many people.

Moreover, in the organisation of the event, for twenty years, the committee has been changing over generations yet some of them keep entangled to the event. Didon (40 years old), for example, is always involved the festival since he was a university student until now, and in 2018 he was a manager of the program. Meanwhile, Dewa (30 years-old) was 10 years old when the first time he involved in the festival and he now has an important role in the event as an artistic manager. These two young people are an example how the festival continuously transmit values and the spirit of tradition among young people

4 CONCLUSIONS

Art festivals in the post-reform era of Indonesia signify the revival of tradition amid the complex intersection of politics, economy, ideology and industries. Art festivals are controlled by stakeholders such as government and industry sectors, so that they are modified to meet these interests. However, Nyiar Lumar is an interesting case when the artists offer unique and particular concepts which bring the performance to the 'authentic' sense of Sundanese through traditional symbols they created: a sacred place in the forest, traditional torch (obor), artistic

elements, art performances, and the symbolic story performed by which refer to the most controversial yet interesting story of Palagan Bubat.

For young audiences and artists, the festival has brought them to the experience of historical moments where they could trace their own story to their ancestors while enjoying old and rare traditional performances coming from different areas in Ciamis. The festival has shown that tradition is the important elements that attract so many audiences in the new era of Indonesia.

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