

## TRANSFORMATION OF MASK FUNCTION FROM RITUAL TO PERFORMANCE ART DURING INDIANIZATION ERA IN INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Mask has given special meaning to Indian culture. Mask is not only used on ancestral worship ritual but also becoming instrument in performance art. Mask in worship ritual, in one hand, and mask in performance art, in the other hand, are not separated after all. Both functions have different existence if it is understood from culture transformation. Based on this reasoning, transformative approach is used by this research where transformation is used as theoretical base in reviewing mask function. This review attempts to ascertain that mask is one of many cultural zones that move simultaneously as a unit during Indianization era and facilitated the dissemination of Indian culture. Focus of this review is given upon the transformation of mask function in an ethnic community in Indonesia. This kind of review is very rare because researcher must use data of archaic documents and artifacts, such as those stored in Medan State Museum and Yogyakarta Sono Budoyo Museum. Other supporting data are literature references. The existing data are further optimized by interview with a historian. Two questions arise in this research, respectively: (1) How mask can be an instrument for ancestral worship ritual? and (2) How mask can be an instrument in performance art (entertainment)? Result of research shows that transformation of mask function has given meaning to conditions and situations confronted by Javanese community during Indianization era in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** instrument, mask, transformation, Java-Malay

### INTRODUCTION

The dissemination of Indian culture in Indonesia has been recognized through the use of mask in ancestral worship ritual and performance art. These two functions of mask are actually not separated one another but only showing different existence, especially when this function is understood culture transformation perspective. Therefore, this research uses transformative approach on the belief that mask is a thing or skill that subjects to transformation. Based on this point, transformation is used as theoretical base in this research in which it is applied by putting community as the subject of review due to their characters of causality and cycle. Positioning the community in this way is consistent with method used by Toynbee & Steward (Rahardjo, 2011:5). Mask has been functioned as an instrument to distinguish one community from another. Furthermore, mask function is reviewed to ensure that mask is one of many cultural zones that move simultaneously as a unit during Indianization era and facilitated the dissemination of Indian culture. Time span of Indianization era is selected because it is an era when a cultural zone receives transference of knowledge, habits, and social manners from other culture or community, which in this context, is Indian culture or community (hereafter called Indianization). This era is marked by the legacy of a King named Purnawarman who reigned over Tarumanegara Kingdom, which the heritage reside around Bogor (Ras, 2014:37).

Before 19th century, Indianization as an academic topic is not yet drawing the attentions of European scholars to be put in their cultural reviews. Only after Raffles promotes this topic by describing Javanese royal system, then Indianization is in the spotlight (Lombat, 2000:5). Some proportions of Javanese civilization have been affected by Indianization, and it can be seen from geographic and community characteristics that show *unilateral* and *organic* attributes. Social relationship pattern of this community is mechanical solidarity. This social relationship emphasizes on uniformity, religion as moral source, and law enforcement through social sanction (Rahardjo, 2011:37). Pramutomo perceives Indianization as an internal conversion involving a conscious approach to actions where each culture adherent disseminates cultural value to one another to inspire the emergence of cultural understandings (Pramutomo, 2014:77).

Indianization is understood by identifying three aspects, respectively, (1) regions that have been affected by Indian culture; (2) community groups that disseminate Indian culture; and (3) capability of communities to preserve their local wisdoms (Rahardjo, 2011:32). Nusantara archipelago communities have local wisdoms as their potential transformative strength. They are indeed affected by Indianization but they never lose their true identity. Communities in Java, Sumatra and other islands are managing the effect of Indianization by adjusting their buildings and life skills to Indian culture (Purwasito, 2002: 66-67). However, current review is no longer leaning on this classic perspective. The review focuses more on positive effort to deal with mask function transformation. This focus is selected recalling the fact that almost all communities in Nusantara archipelago have used mask since long ago although mask is mostly used for ritual purposes. The absorption of Indian culture by Indonesian communities may initiate mask function transformation, which can be actualized through innovative modifications. Therefore, the current review is stressed on two aims, precisely: (1) to understand and describe mask as an instrument in spiritual activity at ancestral worship ritual; and (2) to understand and describe mask as an instrument in performance art (entertainment).

## RESEARCH METHODS

Review is focusing on mask function transformation. In certain community, mask is used to elevate the dignity of social system. If mask helps social system to support the viability of community, then mask becomes crucial element for the sustainability of a community structure (Turner & Maryanski, 2010:113). Ethnic communities in Indonesia during Indianization era are the adherent of Indian culture. This culture is widely disseminated and the most zealot among the adherents is Javanese and Malay. Considering the fact that this review is still rare, then researcher uses data of archaic documents and artifacts kept in museums of Java and Sumatra. Relevant literatures are used as the supporting references to the archaic data. At certain portions, the obtained data are optimized by interview with a historian named Suwardono (56 years old), a writer of book titled *Kertanegara & Misteri Candi Jawi*. Data analysis is using interpretation and the result is presented in verbalistic descriptive way.

## DATA RESULT

Review on mask function transformation takes time period of Indianization era, and the subject is archipelagic community. Chinese people call archipelagic community by term *K'um-lun* (Coudes, 2017:34), referring to people who live in islands in Nusantara (*nusa-antara*), the predecessor name of Indonesia. Although the community cannot escape from the wave of Indianization, they are still organized and successfully conserving their culture. They hunt animals with bow and arrows. It seems that weapon thrower technology already exists in

mechanical nature, and community has skill in using it. Therefore, it can be said that archipelagic community in Nusantara is absorbing Indianization when their culture is already mature. Indianization possibly comes during metal culture era, which means that some islands in Southeast Asia already have acknowledgment about cemetery (*dolmen*), ancestral worship pillar (*menhir*), and stone altar for respecting the deceased leaders (Coudes, 2017:31). Mask is one of artifacts that represent the deceased or ancestral spirits. It is believed that human face has transformed in magical or interpretative way into various forms, and this transformation is depicted into mask. Some faces are scary, and in other faces, some parts are made conspicuous, such as dilated eyes, lateral mouth, elongated nose, and ornamented with terrifying attributes. Supernatural creatures are displayed on the mask through wide mouth and sharp fang (Holt, 2000:23). Mask is also considered as a symbol of human characters, which is divided into soft (*alus*) and harsh (*kasar*) (Colletta, Net & Umar, 1967:91). Concept of dividing human characters into soft and harsh is the proof that community perspective is already subjected to Indianization. Further evidence shows that archipelagic community has divided their geographic area into “mountain” and “sea”. Balinese describes their geographic area with term ‘*kaja-kelod*’, or divine and impure (artikelvictor.blogspot.com/2007/05/ kaja-kelod). Mountain is the place of divine forces (*kaja*), while sea is the place of wicked spirits (*kelod*). Such “black and white” concept is imaginary base in drawing ancestral faces, particularly the face of Kings and Patriots. Both Kings and Patriots are presumed as person with kindness, nobleness, and morality. Indian Hinduism spirituality is presenting Kings and Patriots with soft character. Creativity is the legacy inherited by artists in archipelagic community since the day of prehistoric. Drawing scary faces on mask is their favorite kind of fine art. Prehistoric community drives out their fear of the intruding spirits by wearing scary-face mask. Suwardono explained that scary face mask is symbolizing the procession of exorcising evil spirits (*tolak balak*) (Suwardono, interview on 11 April 2019).



Figure 1. Mask of King / Patriot  
(Collection in Medan State Museum)

The function of mask in Figure 1 is to be a symbolical manifestation. The mask is used in *tolak balak* procession to expel evil spirits that disrupt human life. Such function is related with social immunity that possibly represents the magical power of the mask (Sumardjo, 1986:2).

Mask utilization in *tolak balak* procession also involves technical expertises. Archipelagic community is known for their skill to visualize ancestral faces on the mask. Some masks are given harsh and terrifying faces. Claire Holt even understood that head or face is the most

important part of human body because it is the place where the greatest living power of human resides (Holt,2000: 24). This power is often described with tremendous overstatement. After passing beyond prehistoric era and receiving the arrival of Indianization, archipelagic community starts to internalize concept of drawing human faces differently. Mask artists draw human faces using imitative method, which is done by imitating characters of deities. King or Patriot who already past away but with sublime services to community is often commemorated on mask with soft character, and the mask is usually made of gold and smeared with *pradamas*. Mask designed to personify characters of deities is then becoming traditional legacy. Statue or mask engravers begin to use materials other than gold. They utilize silver, bronze, copper, wood or even clay. The material selected is reflecting the social status of the deceased (Akwan, 1984:59). The culmination of mask popularity in Indianization era is during the heyday of Majapahit Kingdom when King Hayam Wuruk organized mask rite called *Sraddha* (Firdaus, 2017). It was the biggest rite that is done to commemorate 12 years of the demise of Sri Raja Patni, grandmother of Hayam Wuruk. The rite is indeed aimed as ancestral worship. As the time goes, Javanese community transforms their habit of pilgrimage into an activity called *nyadran* ([historia.id/kuno/articles/dari-sraddha-ke-sadran-P140g](http://historia.id/kuno/articles/dari-sraddha-ke-sadran-P140g)). The community in Kedungmangga Village, Malang Regency, has performed *nyadran* that involves *gebyak suguh pundhen* and mask puppet (*wayang topeng*) performance (Hidajat, 2018:31-32). Moreover, Javanese also recognizes the function of mask to entertain the nobilities and also the common peoples. In certain seasons, some rich peoples in Java hold festivities to create joyful moment. Kings and nobilities can launch entertainment shows for days (Soedarsono, 2011:103).

## DISCUSSION

After reviewing literatures and artifacts concerning mask during Indianization era in Southeast Asia, it is found that there are some regions strongly affected by Indian Hinduism culture. This culture penetration has crawled into social system, social structure, morality and aesthetical expression of Indonesian community, including artists and appreciators. Study of literatures about mask has found two strong tendencies. One is that mask is ritual instrument, while the other is that mask is used for performance art or entertainment.

### Mask as Instrument of Ancestral Worship Ritual

Data of literatures and artifacts stored in Medan State Museum and Sono Budoyo Museum of Yogyakarta are explored. Mask artifacts seem indicating the phenomenon of transformation of skills, concepts, and methods in reconstructing the figure of ancestors, especially in drawing ancestors' face on the mask. Prehistoric Malay community prefers to create big and harsh masks, which are stored in the collection of Medan State Museum, while Yogyakarta Sono Budoyo Museum is generally consisting of collection of puppet (*wayang*) patterned masks.

Result of diachronic observation has shown that ancestral figure is manifested into a form of *menhir* or worship pillar. The pillar is not only ritual instrument but also a symbol of the essence of male human. As time changes, the community is mastering techniques of forming and drawing faces. They are skilled in using chisel devices, shaping knife, and color pigments. Along with the arrival of Indianization wave, the community is inspired by statues of deities that stand at stone temple. Mask drawing method starts to involve more realistic techniques and patterns. It can be seen on puppet patterned masks stored as the collection of Yogyakarta Sono Budoyo Museum.



Figure 2. Puppet Patterned Mask (Gunungsari)  
(Collection of Yogyakarta Sono Budoyo Museum)

Shape of mask and its preparation technique have affected mask function. Prehistoric mask is deemed to have magical power of ancestors and thus loaded with ancient mythologies. Ritual procession needs adherent community. If the adherent community refuses to conserve, then traditional ritual is no longer upheld. As the time goes, mask is no longer the imitation of concrete object, but it has become delineation of characters. Such transformation has been considered reasonable by the believers of ancestral spirits. Delineation of transcendental characters cannot be captured physically. Javanese delineates transcendental characters using expression of “*tan kinaya ngapa*” (unthinkable by human). This expression undermines the importance of mask such that it is no longer needed as ritual instrument.

### Mask as Instrument in Performance Art

In performance art, mask is used to delineate characters of certain figures. Genuine nature of human is represented on mask in order to obtain sympathetic suggestions from audiences. After the arrival of Indian culture, many masks are reinforced with innovation. Indianization has stimulated Nusantara archipelago community, especially Javanese, to express their verbal understandings through performance art. Delineation of ancestors was initially manifested through paintings on cave wall, and the next development was signed through drawings on barks, cloths, and papers. Ancestors are then made appeared in dramatic presentation called “*leather puppets*” (*wayang kulit*). Not only that, visual expression is reinforced by presenting human with mask on the stage. Entertainment show using mask is possibly the most spectacular performance art based on result of Indian culture procession.

Indianization in Java may have substantiated the potentialities of mask visualization technique because human face presented at the performance stage can be captured in more realistic way. Mask is an instrument to visualize characteristics of figures played in the story. The late Kings and Patriots are revered in order to make their spirits to be the protector of community. Therefore, Kings and Patriots are the contributor, the conserver, and the determiner of artistical flavor of mask. Any rulers surely have capacity to maintain their power. When all cults on rulers’ identity are gone, their power is vanished, and mask is no longer useful as rulers’ instrument to entertain their people.

### CONCLUSION

Indianization has given transformative impact on mask function in Southeast Asia regions, and this impact is reviewed on Javanese community. The necessities of spirituality and entertainment (performance art) are expressed by Javanese with mask. Paradigmatically, Indianization has been absorbed smoothly without wrinkles although some local functions

and potentials must be adjusted to it. Mask is symbolizing the spirits of ancestors, and their manifestation on real world has been expressed in various rituals conducted by common peoples or even royalties. Transformation of mask function from ritual to performance art is occurring due to the displacement of mindset and belief to the popular culture, and the obsession on modernity. If this transformation is allowed without restraint, mask can be no longer useful as cultural legacy.

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