

Weaving Wayang Klithik into Gotanjung Village's Sedekah Bumi through The Sacred Thread

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Abstract

Wayang klithik, a two-dimensional wooden puppetry tradition, is found in several regions in Central and East Java. In Gotanjung Village, Pati Regency, Central Java, *wayang klithik* is performed during *sedekah bumi*, a traditional ceremony that is commonly held by Javanese communities. Grounded in Lord's (1960) theory on the origin of oral tradition, this research investigates the roots and mechanisms behind the sacrality of *wayang klithik* in the context of Gotanjung Village. In addition, the analysis adopts Vansina's (1985) theoretical approach to oral tradition to explore more deeply why *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village has become an inseparable element of *sedekah bumi*, and how its ritual significance is manifested within the framework of community beliefs and cultural values. Using an ethnographic approach, data were collected through field observations, interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions. The data were analyzed through narrative and conversational analysis to ensure alignment with the community's perspective. The findings indicate that the history of *wayang klithik* puppet-making in Gotanjung strongly influenced its sacredness. In terms of ritual significance, *wayang klithik* serves as an offering to honor the village's founding ancestors and reinforces the core values embedded within the series of rituals in the *sedekah bumi*.

Keywords: *wayang klithik*, *sedekah bumi*, ritual, performing arts

Introduction

Oral tradition is a tradition that is passed down orally from generation to generation (Akhir Gusti et al., 2021). Oral traditions as part of local culture have been explored as communication tools within a cultural community (Fakhriati et al., 2023). Talking about oral traditions means discussing the cultural cognitive system that manifests in various cultural practices. Traditional ceremonies is one of the manifestations of cultural cognitive system and they are typically transmitted through generations orally.

Sedekah bumi is a traditional ceremony that is commonly held by Javanese communities. Terminologically, *sedekah bumi* refers to the act of giving offerings to the earth (Prasasti, 2020). *Sedekah bumi* is a traditional ceremony that represents human gratitude to God for blessings received and hope for abundant fortune in the future (Huda, 2017). Moreover, *sedekah bumi* is also conducted to prevent misfortune, disasters, illnesses, and various hardships (Rachmawati et al., 2021). The practice of *sedekah bumi* reflects a human effort to maintain life's balance in line with Javanese philosophy which emphasizes harmony between *jagad alit* (microcosm) and *jagad gedhe* (macrocosm).

Each region has its own traditions and *pakem* (customary rules) for conducting *sedekah bumi*, adapted to the ancestral traditions of the community. There is a belief among Javanese communities that if *sedekah bumi* is not conducted according to

tradition and its *pakem*, it is believed that something unfortunate will befall them (Rachmawati et al., 2021). *Sedekah bumi* usually consists of a series of rituals based on the traditions and customs of each region. In addition, it is also common for distinctive traditional performing arts of each region to be featured in *sedekah bumi*. For instance, Bunbarat Village in Sumenep, East Java presents the Ojhung performance during *sedekah bumi* (Alrianingrum, 2017). Meanwhile, Triguno Village in Pati, Central Java presents *wayang kulit* and *ketoprak* (Ristiani et al., 2024).

Gotanjung Village is located in Margoyoso District, Pati Regency, Central Java, and is one of the many regions in Java that still practices *sedekah bumi* annually. In Gotanjung Village, according to the Javanese calendar system, *sedekah bumi* is celebrated on Saturday *Kliwon* in the month of *Apit*. This specific timing is deeply rooted in local customs. Holding the ceremony on a different day is considered forbidden or culturally inappropriate.

In Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* ceremony, *wayang klithik* performance—a two-dimensional wooden puppet theater also known in some regions as *wayang krucil* (Irawanto, 2021)—has become an integral part of the ceremony. *Wayang klithik* performance in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* presents *Among Tani* narrative—a local folktale about a farmer who successfully reclaimed Java's prosperity and his life partner Dewi Sri from the hands of the enemy. It becomes a distinctive characteristic of Gotanjung's *wayang klithik*, as most *wayang klithik* performances present the narratives of *Panji Asmorobangun*, *Babad Majapahit*, and *Babad Menak* (Irawanto, 2019, 2021)—the last of which is used for *dakwah* or Islamic teachings (Ussolihah & Falaq, 2023). Villagers believe that excluding *wayang klithik* performance risks inviting misfortune, as both the ceremony and performance hold sacred significance (interview with Tasir & Sulikah on Januari 15, 2024). This raises the question of why *Among Tani* is performed, rather than other common *wayang klithik* stories. The writers then hypothesize that this particular play may be closely related to the essence of *sedekah bumi*.

Historically, *wayang* performances were used as a medium for worshiping ancestral spirits (*hyang*) (Mertosedono, 1986). This aligns with Lord's (1960) statement that the origins of oral traditions are fundamentally religious rather than artistic. Although *wayang* has developed over time as a form of art or entertainment, its function as a medium for rituals and spiritual practices—can still be observed in its current forms. For example, *wayang kulit* in Java is used in *ruwatan* ceremonies (Suanti & Lestari, 2020), same as *wayang kulit* in Bali (Wicaksana & Wicaksandita, 2023). *Wayang klithik*, which is often associated with specific rituals, also serves as evidence that the ritual function of *wayang* has not entirely disappeared.

Previous studies on *wayang klithik* have noted its ritual significance in certain regions of Central and East Java. For instance, in Wonosoco Village, Kudus Regency, Central Java *wayang klithik* is associated with a cleansing sacred spring ritual called *resik-resik sendang* or *sedekah sendang* (Murtana, 2018). However, this ritual function in Wonosoco has shifted toward entertainment and creative economic activities (Umma et al., 2023), influenced by the village's designation as a tourism destination (Murtana, 2018). In East Java, *wayang klithik* is often performed during the day in conjunction with rituals such as *bersih desa* or *nyadran* (Irawanto & Sutarwiyasa, 2018). In the ritual context, *wayang klithik* is considered a sacred artifact in the spiritual realm (Irawanto, 2019). Despite these observations, previous researches above have not deeply analyzed how the ritual functions of *wayang klithik* are implemented in specific ceremonies. Research conducted by Budi Utomo (Budi Utomo, 2015) has revealed how the ritual functions of *wayang klithik* are implemented in the *manganan janjang* ritual in Blora,

Central Java. However, *wayang klithik* in Blora has different characteristics from *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village, Pati, in various aspects, as well as the community's perspectives and dynamics. Meanwhile, researchers have not found any research that specifically analyzes *wayang klithik* performance in Gotanjung Village.

To address this research gap, this study focuses on *wayang klithik* performance in Gotanjung Village's *sedekah bumi* ceremony, not only as entertainment but also as a medium that supports ritual values in the ceremony with its sacred nature. Grounded in Lord's (1960) theory on the origin of oral tradition, this research investigates the roots and mechanisms behind the sacrality of *wayang klithik* in the context of Gotanjung Village. In addition, the analysis adopts Vansina's (1985) theoretical approach to oral tradition to explore more deeply why *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village has become an inseparable element of *sedekah bumi*, and how its ritual significance is manifested within the framework of community beliefs and cultural values.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach to document, analyze, and describe a culture from the perspective of its own community (Spradley, 2006). Ethnography, as a participatory and holistic method, enabled the researchers to deeply engage with the daily lives of Gotanjung villagers while accounting for the interconnected social and cultural dimensions of their environment.

Data were collected through a combination of field observation, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD). Field observations were conducted before and during *sedekah bumi* to directly observe and document the preparation process and the performance of *wayang klithik*. Interviews were conducted with key informants (**Table 1**) to gather information on *wayang klithik* and *sedekah bumi*. Furthermore, FGD was held after *sedekah bumi*, involving a village representative, a religious figure, and a cultural observer (**Table 2**) to validate the collected data and facilitate further discussion.

Table 1. List of Informants

Informants	Role
Ki Condro Priyono (Mbah Priyo)	Wayang klithik puppeteer
Ibu Yayuk	Wayang klithik puppet collection's owner
Ibu Sri	Bu Yayuk's younger sister
Budi Hantomo	Villager
Tasir	Villager
Sulikah	Villager

Table 2. Participants of FGD

Participants	Role
Mbah Udip	Religious figure
Mbah Kliwon	Cultural observer
Aris	Villager representation

The collected data were analyzed through narrative and conversation analysis while ensuring a culturally grounded interpretation. The interpretative process maintained ethnographic reflexivity to ensure that the analysis was grounded in the perspective of the cultural community.

Results

The history of *wayang klithik* puppet making in Gotanjung has played a significant role in shaping its sacredness. Villagers believe that the puppet collection possesses mystical power because the craftsman adhere to a strict spiritual ritual during the crafting process known as *puasa mutih*—a form of fasting in which only white rice and water are consumed daily, accompanied by meditation. This perception of the puppets' sacred nature ultimately influences how they are treated, particularly by Bu Yayuk's family, the custodians of the *wayang klithik* collection, who handle them with great care to ensure their preservation.

Furthermore, in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi*, *wayang klithik* serves as an offering to honor the village's founding ancestors, just as *sedekah bumi* itself is intended to commemorate the village's anniversary and reinforce the collective memory of Gotanjung's history. This history is closely tied to Mbah Soreng and his three siblings, who are recognized as key figures in the village's establishment. The organization of *sedekah bumi* and the performance of *wayang klithik* reflect the villagers' efforts to sustain their spiritual connection with their ancestors. Moreover, through *Among Tani* narrative, *wayang klithik* reinforces the symbolic significance of rice within the series of rituals in *sedekah bumi*, with rice personified by Dewi Sri.

Discussion

The Sacred Legacy of Gotanjung's Wayang Klithik

The collection of *wayang klithik* puppet in Gotanjung Village belongs to a family that has been descended from the village's former chief. Currently, the collection is entrusted to the fourth generation of the family. Among the six siblings of this generation, Bu Yayuk, along with her sister, Bu Sri, is tasked with safeguarding and maintaining the ancestral *wayang klithik* puppet collection. The other four siblings have moved away and no longer reside in Gotanjung Village.

Through interviews with Bu Yayuk and Bu Sri, they explained that the puppets were crafted by a renowned *wayang klithik* craftsman from Kedungpanjang, Margoyoso District, Pati. The craftsman practiced a strict spiritual ritual during the crafting process called *puasa mutih*, a fasting practice in which only white rice and water were consumed daily, alongside meditation. Many believed that these rituals imbued the puppets with mystical energy, a belief passed down through generations. Bu Yayuk's great-grandfather then purchased the puppets from the craftsman. They estimated that the puppets are more than 200 years old today.

The *wayang klithik* puppets are housed in an inherited family home (**Figure 1**) next to Bu Yayuk's current residence. This heritage house has remained unoccupied since the death of Bu Yayuk's parents and now serves solely as a storage space for *wayang klithik* puppets. In the past, before the establishment of the village hall, this house was a venue for various community activities.



Figure 1. An Inherited House for the Storage of Wayang Klithik

The puppets are stored in a large green box (**Figure 2**), consists of 93 *wayang klithik* puppets and 15 three-dimensional *wayang golek* puppets. The inclusion of three-dimensional *wayang golek* puppets in these performances adds a distinctive characteristic of Gotanjung's *wayang klithik*. These different types of puppets were selected for performances based on the storyline, adding versatility to *wayang klithik* performances.



Figure 2. Large Green Storage Box

In addition to the large green box, four specific *wayang klithik* puppets were stored separately in a smaller brown box (**Figure 3**) because of their highest sacred status (**Table 3**). These sacred *wayang klithik* puppets receive special attention and treatment compared to other puppets in the large green box.



Figure 3. Small Brown Storage Box

Table 3. List of The Most Sacred Wayang Klithik Puppets

No.	Wayang Klithik Puppets	Representation
1.	Jalodeh	A <i>dangkong</i> (elder figure) known for his great wisdom.
2.	Prasonto	A <i>dangkong</i> known for his liveliness and humor.
3.	Among Tani	A farmer hero who protected the land of Java.
4.	Golek Baku	A beautiful female puppet that can dance.

The sacredness and mystical reputation of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village also persists through the stories and occurrences recounted by the villagers. A particularly well-known story among Gotanjung villagers involves Mbah Gunawan, a previous *wayang klithik* puppeteer in Gotanjung (interview with Tasir, Sulikah, and Mbah Priyo on Januari 15, 2024). During his time as a puppeteer, Mbah Gunawan undertook the task of repainting Jalodeh, one of the four most sacred puppets. However, during this process, he reportedly made disrespectful remarks about the puppet. On one occasion, while traveling with the puppet, he stopped to relieve himself by the roadside. According to his account, the initially solid ground beneath his feet suddenly turned soft and muddy, leaving him struggling to free himself. This unsettling experience was only beginning. After completing the repainting of the puppet, Mbah Gunawan passed away unexpectedly. The villagers attribute his death to his perceived disrespect toward the sacred puppets, reinforcing the deeply ingrained belief that these *wayang klithik* puppets are more than just artifacts of art but a sacred puppet.

In Lord's (1960) view, tradition gains legitimacy through continual oral transmission and communal memory. The story of the puppets' origin and their sacred nature is preserved and transmitted by Bu Yayuk's family as the authority and has gradually spread throughout the Gotanjung community. These narratives play a crucial role in maintaining the sacred values of *wayang klithik* within the local cultural system. The story of Mbah Gunawan's misfortune is also continuously told and retold to strengthen collective beliefs about the puppets' sacrality. This oral transmission illustrates how belief in the sacredness of the puppets is actively reinforced through storytelling to safeguard the community's shared boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

Honoring Ancestors through Wayang Klithik

In Gotanjung Village, the ritual function of *wayang klithik* during *sedekah bumi* underscores its enduring cultural and spiritual significance. The practice is intertwined with the village's historical narrative, passed down orally through generations. The researchers collected information about the historical narrative of Gotanjung Village through interviews with Ki Dalang Condro Priyono, commonly known as Mbah Priyo, a *wayang klithik* puppeteer who is also the most knowledgeable individual on Gotanjung's historical narrative.

Mbah Priyo stated that before it was established as a village, Gotanjung's landscape had been a dense forest. One day, a knight of Raden Pekik named Mbah Soreng arrived in Gotanjung with his three sisters. Mbah Soreng and his three siblings intended to establish a village. While exploring and clearing the forest, they discovered a lake shaded by a *tanjung* tree (English: spanish cherry tree). Finally, according to the Javanese calendar, on a Saturday Kliwon in the month of Apit, a village named Gotanjung was established—derived from the Javanese word *tlogo* (*go*), meaning "lake", and *tanjung*, referring to the *tanjung* tree.

The lake discovered by Mbah Soreng was dried up long ago, and the former lake area was transformed into a sacred site known as *punden* (**Figure 4**). A villager named Budi Hantomo (interview on January 14, 2024) explained that his grandfather once told him about the condition of the lake, whose water had gradually receded and turned into a swamp. Today, the *punden* area has transformed into an open field surrounded by trees. Among them, there is one particularly large tree where villagers place offerings and pray. Next to this large tree stands a *pendopo* (pavilion). *Sedekah bumi* is held at *punden*, and *wayang klithik* performance takes place in *pendopo*.



Figure 4. Punden

The yearly tradition of *sedekah bumi* on a Saturday Kliwon in the month of Apit signifies that the ceremony is not just a celebration rooted in agrarian culture to reflect gratitude for blessings through the land but also a form of village commemoration based on the oral history of Gotanjung. This indicates that historical aspects influence how the community determines the specific timing of *sedekah bumi*.

The selection of this particular time also serves to honor the ancestors, particularly Mbah Soreng, who played a significant role in establishing the village (interviews with Mbah Priyo and Budi, January 15, 2024). The integration of *wayang klithik* into the *sedekah bumi* ceremony stems from Mbah Soreng's deep appreciation for this art form. Therefore, performing *wayang klithik* during the ceremony serves as an offering to Mbah Soreng.

To gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives shaping Gotanjung villagers' attitudes toward their ancestors, researchers explored this through FGD involving a religious leader, a cultural figure, and a villager representative. The discussion revealed that the villagers perceived Mbah Soreng as a parental figure. Despite his death, the community continues to believe that his spirit will continue to accompany them. This belief is materialized through the existence of the *punden*, which is considered the resting place of Mbah Soreng's spirit.

According to Mbah Udip, a religious leader in Gotanjung, *wayang klithik* performance during *sedekah bumi* ceremony symbolizes an offering of respect to Mbah Soreng, akin to honoring one's parent. By presenting *wayang klithik* as a form of offering, villagers aim to ensure Mbah Soreng's contentment, which they believe will, in turn, help bridge their prayers to God to ensure community well-being. This practice resonates with the Islamic concept of *tawassul*, a form of prayer that involves an intermediary (*wasilah*) that is permitted in Islam to draw closer to Allah or to have one's wishes

fulfilled (Badaruddin & Mahyudin, 2022). In this context, parent can serve as an intermediary approved by Islam.

The practice of Islam in Gotanjung Village demonstrates a profound integration with local traditions, reflecting what Geertz (2013) described as *Islam Abangan*, a syncretic approach that blends Islamic teachings with indigenous Javanese traditions. Koentjaraningrat (1994) characterized this concept as *Islam Kejawen*, which embodies a syncretic worldview that integrates Islamic teachings with a comprehensive Javanese spirituality. *Kejawen* is not merely a belief system but a holistic perspective that infuses various aspects of Javanese life, including traditions, customs, and cognitive frameworks. *Islam Kejawen* acknowledges not only God and the prophet but also the significant role of ancestors and spiritual entities as intermediaries.

The narrative of Mbah Soreng has emerged within a cultural framework heavily reliant on oral traditions to construct, transmit, and preserve collective identity. In addition to community narratives, the story of Mbah Soreng cannot be substantiated through historical documents, raising questions about whether he was an actual historical figure or a product of myth. Oral history about Mbah Soreng is linked to Raden Pekik, also known as Pangeran Pekik, whose existence can be validated through historical records. Raden Pekik or Pangeran Pekik was the last crown prince of Kadipaten Surabaya before the territory was annexed by the Mataram Sultanate under Sultan Agung's rule in 1625 (Nugroho, 2023). Raden Pekik is also a direct descendant of Sunan Ampel (Arizal, 2021). The association of Mbah Soreng's narrative with the history of Raden Pekik indicates a way of reinforcing Mbah Soreng's legitimacy, making his existence more convincing.

Vansina (1985) stated that oral traditions are not passive recollections, but are active processes that both reflect and shape the society in which they are told. Oral traditions serve political, social, and spiritual functions by legitimizing authority and justifying communal practices. The oral narrative surrounding Mbah Soreng functions as a form of historical memory that defines the village's origin and legitimize its ritual landscape. Mbah Soreng, who was represented as a *wasilah*, possibly underwent a process of mystification aimed at legitimizing the practice of performing *wayang klithik* in *sedekah bumi*. The oral history of Gotanjung Village and the narrative of Mbah Soreng reinforce the collective understanding that *wayang klithik* in *sedekah bumi* is not merely a customary practice but also a cultural and religious obligation. Without such legitimization, the endurance of this tradition could be significantly challenged. Thus, these narratives serve as a foundation to ensure the sustainability of Gotanjung's cultural heritage.

In addition, the ritualistic nature of *sedekah bumi* aligns closely with Jan Vansina's (1985) statement that traditions with ritual functions are not arbitrarily performed. Ritual performances are governed by specific rules concerning timing, place, and frequency, reflecting their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual significance. In the case of Gotanjung Village, *sedekah bumi* is conducted annually on a Saturday Kliwon in the month of Apit at *punden*, accompanied by *wayang klithik* performance. These specific rules are rooted in village oral history, shaping how the community relates to its past.

Wayang Klithik to Reinforce Values within the Series of rituals in Sedekah Bumi

The *sedekah bumi* ceremony in Gotanjung Village consists of a series of rituals led by the village chief and his retinue. The ritual procession began when they placed *sajen* (offerings) and recited prayers beside a sacred tree where the offerings are laid (**Figure 5**). They prayed to God for the smooth execution of *sedekah bumi* and for Gotanjung

Village to be blessed with prosperity in the coming year. Additionally, they offered prayers for their ancestors as an expression of gratitude and respect. The village chief and his wife then distributed rice from a basket and pour purified water from a pottery jug to the villagers who gathered in a circle around the tree (**Figure 6**). In Gotanjung's cultural system, rice is more than just an agricultural commodity—it is a collective symbol imbued with meanings that villagers interpret as a representation of prosperity. The symbol of rice is paired with water, as sufficient irrigation is essential for rice cultivation.



Figure 5. Praying and Placing Sajen



Figure 6. Rice and Water Distribution

Wayang klithik performance through the story of *Among Tani* reinforces the symbolism of rice within the series of rituals in *sedekah bumi*, with rice represented by Dewi Sri. In Javanese culture, Dewi Sri is regarded as the Goddess of Rice (Nastiti, 2020) or the Goddess of Prosperity (Wati et al., 2025). This belief is reflected in various myths and folktales passed down through generations. *Among Tani* story embodies the deep connection between humans and nature, specifically between farmers and rice, through the fated bond between *Among Tani* and Dewi Sri.

The story of *Among Tani* narrated Java as a prosperous land ruled by Prabu Pancawarna, a wise king who had a beautiful and graceful daughter named Dewi Sri. However, the peace was threatened when Prabu Kolomurko, a powerful king from a distant land, arrived to conquer Java and claim Dewi Sri as his bride. *Among Tani* fought to defend the land of Java and his beloved, Dewi Sri. With the guidance of the elder figures Jalodeh and Prasonto, *Among Tani* received a powerful weapon, *trisula*, to defeat Prabu Kolomurko. *Among Tani*, armed with his *trisula*—a weapon with sharp, pointed

edges—finally triumphs over Prabu Kolomurko, restoring prosperity to the land of Java and ensuring the safety of Dewi Sri.



Figure 7. Battle Scene of Among Tani and Prabu Kolomurko

The inclusion of *wayang klithik* as an integral part of *sedekah bumi* underscores that ritual performances are not just expressions of belief, but mechanisms for preserving cultural identity. According to Vansina (1985), the ritual dimensions of oral tradition regulate communal memory and shape collective identity. In Gotanjung Village, the performance of *wayang klithik* is not simply entertainment but as a medium that reaffirms the village's agrarian identity, particularly through the story of *Among Tani*.

Conclusion

Wayang klithik performance in Gotanjung Village's *sedekah bumi* illustrates how a performing art with its sacred nature plays a crucial role in supporting a ritual. The history of *wayang klithik* puppet making in Gotanjung has played a significant role in shaping its sacredness. The sacredness of these puppets strengthens its ritual significance within *sedekah bumi* ceremony. The historical aspects of Gotanjung Village also influence the sacredness and implications of *wayang klithik* in *sedekah bumi*. The narrative of Mbah Soreng provides legitimacy and reinforces the collective perception of villagers regarding the significance of *wayang klithik* in *sedekah bumi*. By portraying Mbah Soreng as an ancestor who admired *wayang klithik*, the community established a strong justification for preserving this tradition—not merely as entertainment but as an offering to Mbah Soreng, with the hope that their aspirations and wishes would be fulfilled. In this way, the narrative of Mbah Soreng fosters a spiritual connection between the villagers and their ancestors, creating a sacred space within their lives. Furthermore, through the story of *Among Tani*, *wayang klithik* performance successfully positions itself as a medium for reinforcing agrarian values, which are reflected in the series of rituals in the *sedekah bumi* ceremony. Thus, both *wayang klithik* performance and the practice of *sedekah bumi* share the same objective: to serve as the villagers' effort to preserve their cultural and spiritual connection with nature and their ancestors.

Since this study highlights the ritual significance of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village, the author acknowledges that its scope remains limited to a specific local context. Future research could explore the variations of *wayang klithik* performances in other regions, particularly in relation to their ritual roles in different traditional ceremonies, thereby revealing how local beliefs, perspectives, and historical narratives shape the function of *wayang klithik* in various communities. Additionally, further

studies could examine the impact of modernization and cultural shifts on *wayang klithik*, which may lead to a transformation of its function from sacred to profane.

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