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The Variety of *Lengger* Banyumas' Performances

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to center on the variety of styles of *lengger* - a traditional art found in Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. The article offers a new approach towards understanding *lengger* by indicating the development that underwent in the performance structure. The study was conducted in Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia for the period of over a year, between 2022 and early 2024. Using qualitative approach, this study is aimed to explore the variety of the dance practiced by local actors. By using qualitative approach, data was collected using in-depth and semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. There are 13 participants that participated in this study, consisting of local figures engaged in various *lengger* activities, such as dancers, teachers, and owners of dance studios. The study indicates that *lengger* evolved greatly in terms of its dance performance. In order to demonstrate this, I use "dance fragments" - a specific moments of performance, time and space to indicate the development of the art's structure, based on personal ethnographic study. Nine varieties of *lengger* were identified - *lengger klasik*, *lengger barangan*, *lengger resmi*, *lengger muslimah*, *lengger garapan*, *lengger calung barasai*, *lengger selingan*, *lengger campursari*, and *lengger modern*. Pointing out the various styles of *lengger* helps further understand the cultural processes and current trends of the society in Banyumas. Having these changes in its structure where dominant trends overshadow the traditional understanding is a way of keeping the art alive, while *lengger's* peaceful cohabitation with other arts speaks about the tolerant nature of people in Banyumas.

1. Introduction

Lengger is a backronym that encompasses different terms and understandings. Sunaryadi (2000) has put the effort to collect and decipher the meaning behind the term. According to his findings - *lengger* derives from the words *leng* and *jengger*. *Leng* symbolises the female beginning, while *jengger* describes the male one. Put together, they form the definition of "*dikira perempuan, tetapi ternyata laki-*

laki" ("thought to be a woman, turns out it is a man") which speaks of an art that offers a cross-dressing element. This is one of the most common definitions that the researcher has met during his field studies. At the same time, other meanings of the art talk about worshipping God, obedience to parents, mastering one's own body and spirituality. It is essential to mention that *lengger* is oral, dynamic and instinctive – meaning that it is a dance tradition with oral roots that thrives in a dynamic society, therefore one is left to their own instincts on how to interpret the dance. Nevertheless, all people that the researcher spoke to, declared that the dance is a traditional art from Banyumas and its importance remained over centuries, even though it had to adapt, evolve and develop in terms of performance following the changes in society. It is quintessential to note that *lengger* is part of the popular tradition of Javanese dance, or as Geertz (1990) interprets it – low tradition, that evolved outside of the sultan's palace. Despite that fact, *lengger's* importance for the Banyumas society has been significant as its existence is entwined in the people's life and comes alive in the form of spirituality, entertainment and form of expression.

Indonesia has an abundant fund of dances that characterises its diverse culture, habits and norms. From Sabang to Merauke one could not simply calculate the varieties of dance that colour the land of Indonesia. Dance, as a form of expression, has long played pivotal role in people's lives. In one of the earliest works on dance, Evans-Pritchard (1928) stresses on the importance of dance in society, especially functions and social value. Functionally, dance is inseparable part of religious processes, and at the same time a founding element of organisation and harmony. Narrowing the research on dance in Java, Indonesia, Geertz (1976:282) argues that dance bears the identity of the Javanese people and participates in important moments of their life. This is related to the concept of *olah rasa* or uniting inner world (*batin*) and outer reality (*lahir*), as stated by Walton (2007) to produce a system of beliefs that is still found in Javanese ethic codes today. That is why, dance shapes the soul of the person (Soedarsono, 1997), builds character (Sunaryadi, 2013), forms discipline and decisiveness (Wahyudi & Gunawan, 2020), and serves as a guide for personal growth (Rahapsari, 2021). With that being said, it must be noted that the human factor in dance is the main element that pushes dance to evolve, adjust and develop over time, thus assuming new positions, trends and forms that help preserving the performing art in the constantly changing world.

Prior to discovering the richness that there is in rural art form, researches have been preoccupied with the grand dance tradition of Java, namely palace dances. However, recently studies show that the interest in the local art of popular origin is on the rise. The case also applies to *lengger*. Over the past decade *lengger* has seen a growth in its popularity and many researchers, including journalists, have turned to acknowledge and examine the art academically or journalistically. To summarise it up, there are nine domains of academic interest in *lengger* – describing the art form and its existence in terms of history, performance, music, attire and functions (Aprilia, 2021; Kamtoni & Prihatini, 2020; Lestari & Barus, 2021; Marsiana & Arsih, 2018; Novita Dewi, 2021; Pemiluwati & Bisri, 2020;

Pratiwi & Rokhman, 2018). Most popular researches have been the depictions of prominent *lengger* dancers and groups, as well as their life work. In those work complete profiles of dancers and groups are described to show the tremendous efforts in doing arts in Banyumas (Candilanita, 2015; Fatmawaty *et al.*, 2018; Hayati, 2016; Nur'Aini, 2015; Supriono, 2014). In addition, *lengger* has been examined in terms of religion and spirituality – academicians have paid attention to the importance of spiritualism in *lengger* and its importance to the dancers and community (Noviansah *et al.*, 2023; Suraji, 2010; Susana *et al.*, 2018). The entertainment aspect of *lengger* has also been an interesting topic of discussion. Researchers have noted that there is a shift in the original idea behind *lengger*, with nowadays becoming a source of entertainment rather than a medium of worshipping God (Lestari & Barus, 2021; Yusantari, 2017). Last, but not least gender and issues regarding cross-genderism, marginalisation of dancers involving LGBT trends are discussed (Permana, 2021; Raharjo *et al.*; 2022; Widyanta, 2020).

This study falls in the first domain of research, namely its existence. The novelty of the current study is in the identification of the variety of *lengger* performances and their applicability towards Banyumas society. Through a discussion on its varieties one can see deeper in the social structure of Banyumas and identify important aspects of the people and their culture. This study aims to build up on the existing literature on *lengger* and further enrich understandings towards the art and Banyumas society.

This article is constructed of two parts. *First*, it discusses a portrait of the basics of the *lengger*, with an accent on definition, records, songs and music. This is followed by a categorisation of all nine varieties of the dance, described by following the dance fragments concept. A discussion beyond the performance, focused on the connection between dance and society is given.

2. Method

This research was carried out in the region of Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia for roughly a year and a half (between October 2022 and March 2024.), concentrating on the dance art form *lengger Banyumas* or simply *lengger*. The decision to do fieldwork on the art can be traced back to my initial interest in Indonesian dances – their meanings, hidden symbolics and profound canon of rules. The numerous papers on royal classical dance in Indonesia made I look and search for new meanings in the periphery (rural areas) rather focusing on the epicentre (sultan's palaces) with hopes to uncover how the art evolved in terms of performance over the centuries.

This paper follows a qualitative approach with main objective being the identification of *lengger* performance variety. In order to completely understand *lengger*, I spent months travelling across Greater Banyumas area (this includes all districts in Banyumas province) to capture moments, performances, as well as speak with actors and communities, including audiences to establish one wholesome view of *lengger's* diverse set of performances. In hopes to offer a more thorough account on that, data was collected using participant observation, in-

depth and semi-structured interviews. Visual data is included to supplement the findings of this study. Data is presented through the concept of dance fragments.

Starting with participant observation, I was able to immerse myself in the daily life and activities of the people – including dancers, actors, and the audience as means to get closer to the community and information access. It is good to mention that getting closer to informants and making them speak and identify crucial moments of *lengger's* performance was not an easy task which made the researcher change his way of doing the study a couple of times. For example, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were started being made several months after the participant observation, when most actors got to know me and understood my purpose of coming to the field site. Mutual trust was built at first, hence the informants' stories and concerns got realer and deeper which indeed helped draw the grand picture of today's *lengger* existence. With in-depth and semi-structured interviews, I was able to hear and note down important moments of *lengger's* characteristics and elements. Those interviews were held in the span of a year at different and unpredictable conditions, such as during trips, performances or over a cup of coffee. Some of those interviews involved a script of questions for the sake of consistency that helped the researcher identify some of the characteristics of the performance. Voice recording and video recording by phone were the instruments used to collect the data. Visual data in the forms of pictures and videos was collected as means to exhibit the surrounding of the performance.

In terms of ethics of the current study, interviews were voluntary and all informants have been explained about the purpose of this study. They have given their consent and agreed to be part of the research, as well as their answers be used as a source for this research. The interviews were conducted on the one-to-one principle, meaning that I met all the informants separately, at a date and time convenient for them. This was done to avoid any influence and transfer of thoughts from one participant to another. All participants were purposely selected, meaning that they know of the *lengger* culture. Participants or informants of the current study are: Rianto (42 years), Adminah (59 years), Sirwan (47 years), Sigit (23 years), Narsih (50s), Saona (55 years), Sukarmi (57 years), Daisah (50s), Rini (54 years), Didit (48 years), Rusdi (45 years), and Otniel (30s) who come from different backgrounds such as dancers, managers of groups, teachers, as well as owners of dance studios.

After collecting the data, I commenced its analysis. The used technique is comprised of three stages, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by Miles & Huberman (1992:16). Data reduction is about the transfer and transformation of the rough field data to simpler one. Data display is to make it concise and systemtised in order to better process the information. Lastly, conclusion drawing bears the true meaning of the data collection, or the information of importance for the current study. In order to present his data, I introduces the concept of "dance fragments" as means to identify more clearly and concisely the variety of dance performances. The idea is taken from Tsing's

(2005) approach during her research of the Meratus Mountains in Kalimantan, Indonesia. Using the fragments, one is able to comment and analyse the phenomenon in its own habitat of time and space which provides a complete account of the studied object. The researcher redefines it as dance fragments to stress that here it is talked about dance. Using this approach this research aims to encourage others to look behind the evident structures of *lengger* and see its actual meaning and evolution which is apparent in the new variety of performances that have started to exist.

3. Result and Discussion

• The Basics of *Lengger* - Definitions, Records, Songs and Music

In this section, I introduces the dance art called *lengger*. A short commentary into its definitions, historical records, as well as repertoire of songs and music is presented to indicate the richness of the art.

As it became evident, *lengger* is a traditional dance art coming from the region of Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. Because of its oral tradition, no strict set of rules were introduced as to what exactly comprises *lengger* and how it should be interpreted. Field research showed that *lengger* is understood and practised differently across Banyumas, hence introducing various meanings of the art. It is of importance with whom and where one talks about *lengger* because new meanings and understandings can be found in every 15 to 20 kilometres in difference.

Rianto (42 years)¹, a prominent *lengger* dancer from Kaliori, Banyumas, and a leading artist popularising the art, reveals that one of the most mainstream definitions comes from the cross-gender nuance of the art, namely the words *leng* and *jengger* - with the first standing for the female beginning, while the latter meaning a rooster's comb. If both words are combined, they produced the term *lengger*, or a dance art that combines male and female elements. Additionally, Adminah (59 years), a famous *lengger* dancer in Banjarwaru, Banyumas, correlates the meaning of *lengger* with the couquettish dancing of female dancers known as *ledhek*, who with their dancing leave the audience at dismay. Suharno (1980:39) explains that *lengger* comes from the words *lang* (wandering) and *enggar* (state of happiness), thus accumulating to an art that makes people happy. Lastly, a more religious understanding of *lengger* is found in the Javanese saying "*elingannger marang Kang Maha Kuasa*," ("Always remember and obey the Almighty")(Sunaryadi, 2000:34).

Having no written record and being a verbal tradition, the origins of the art can only be traced by speaking with actors, locals and people who follow the art for years. According to Rianto (42 years), a prominent *lengger* dancer from Banyumas, the art finds its origins in times when Indonesian archipelago knew no religions. However, this piece of information could no be verified during research. The earliest records the research found is that the art may have been

¹ An interview conducted on 29 June 2022 via Zoom. Rianto is a prominent *lengger* dancer from Kaliori, Banyumas, who is currently one of the leading artists popularising the art.

born during the rule of Hindu-Budha kindgoms in Java. This is supported by a statement made by on of the informants, Sirwan (47 years), a manager of local group of *lengger* performers, who argues that offerings and mysticism has played an important role in the art's existence. In the face of *dupa* or incenses and rich set of foods, a mystical athmosphere is created prior to beginning the performance to seek for guidance and success, which is related to Hindu-Budha times in Indonesia. He further says that *lengger* was part of a ritual to worship the Goddess of Fertility, Dewi Sri, who happens to be the Goddess of Rice, too. Back then women were not allowed to perform due to their menstrual cycle and those roles were executed by men dressed as women. Additionally, Sigit (23 years), an aspiring *lengger* dancer from Muntang, Baturraden, Banyumas, shares that the cross-gender tradition of *lengger* was present during colonial times to seek intelligence and delude the colonial powers. Sunaryadi (2000:31) writes that the art was introduced to Banyumas in 1755 from Mataram Kingdom, but no one confirmed this during the field research. In 2017 the art was announced as intangible heritage of Indonesia by the Ministry of Culture of Indonesia. Nowadays the art keeps developing and changing adapting new elements in its repertoire in order to keep up with the fast-changing world. It welcomes performers from all genders.

As I noticed, the majority of *lengger* events happen under the accompaniment of music and songs which are performed by a group of artists. Those artists include singers (*sindhén*), players (*pengrawit*), and dancers (*penari lengger*), as well as musical instruments – *calung*² or *gamelan*³, which can be combined or used separately. The music is distinguished by a number of characteristics, such as overlapping melodies and rhythms, sudden tempo changes, syncopated rhythm and hilarious voices (Sutton, 2008). As Sirwan (47 years) reveals that songs on the other side resemble Javanese classical poetry and can be divided in two elements – *parikan* and *wangsalan*. *Parikan* is similar to traditional poetry known as *pantun*, where every two lines have a sample and a meaning, but in a melodious way, while *wangsalan* are lyrics in the form of a riddle that makes the listeners guess its original meaning (Subalidinata, 1994). Sirwan (47 years) said that some of the most beloved songs are *Eling-Eling*, *Sekar Gadung*, *Gunungsari* and others, who tell stories about the ethics and morals of the Javanese, such as wisdom, religious teachings, stories from everyday life, and verses of Al-Quran in the form of *sholawatan*. However, all this also underwent changes and adapted to more modern beats and lyrics which incorporated modern music genres and songs. This proves that there is a change in variety of *lengger*.

- **Lengger: Variety of Performances**

In this section I offer a classification of the varieties of the *lengger* performances, which is solely based on my ethogrpahic study. After carefully analysing his data, the writer identifies nine varieties of *lengger*, namely: *lengger klasik*, *lengger barangan*, *lengger resmi*, *lengger muslimah*, *lengger garapan*, *lengger calung barongsai*,

² *Calung* is a traditional bamboo-made musical instrument, originating in Central Java.

³ *Gamelan* is traditional ensemble music of the Javanese people, comprsing of many instruments.

lengger selingan, *lengger campursari*, and *lengger modern*. I have decided to name this varieties as such, based on the way informants and locals addressed them. Not only this, but I also considered the art's functionality in different situations and conditions, such as time, space, audiences, dancers, compositions of the show, equipment, and events when identifying the varieties.

As mentioned earlier, all the variations of *lengger* performances are introduced in "dance fragment" or a specific performance that took place during the writer's research endeavours. What needs to be noted here is that finding where performances take place requires not only time, but also acquaintances as some of these events are not announced virtually (unless it is a festival). Even though that the researcher started studying *lengger* in *Rumah Lengger Banyumas*, a non-profit organisation dedicated to Banyumas' arts, he did not spend all his time there. I visited numerous areas in Banyumas Greater region to collect data which was done through voice and videorecording.

Lengger Klasik

Lengger Klasik, translated as classic *lengger*, represents the essence of the *lengger* art and is believed to be the milestone of the *lengger* performance that laid the foundations of the future development of the dance form. Based on field research, the classic performance commences as early as seven or eight o'clock in the evening and continues till two or three o'clock in the morning. Narsih (50s), a famous *lengger* dancer from Patikraja, Banyumas active since the 1970s, shares that during the 80s and 90s performances would start as early as eleven o'clock at noon and continue to the next morning, taking short breaks in between the prayer times. During an observation of *lengger klasik* performance of Narsih on 8 January 2023 (see Figure 1), I noticed that a full night of *lengger klasik* is comprised of several stages – *labuh* or *klengenan* (playing the musical instruments to attract attention and attendance), *talun* (continuous playing of songs in the presence of a singer), *gending sesaji* (first pieces of dance are performed in a specific and agreed order), *badhutan* or *bodhoran* (the comedy part of the performance, a clown converses with the dancers, speaking on different topics; song requests from the audience are accepted), and a conclusion called *kulu-kulu* or in Purbalingga called *rengongan*, a boisterous dance showing bravery and robust moves, similar to those of past soldiers. The composition of the classic performance was confirmed by Sirwan (47 years), Adminah (59 years), as well as Saona (55 years) and Sukarmi (57 years), both from a *lengger* dancer from Kemangkong, Purbalingga, who shared the same information during their interviews. During the event, I noticed that the presence of police was sensible. The police's main function at *lengger* events is to surveil and make sure that no accidents, such as fights, happen. Police also controls the traffic around the area, which can be quite much if the local people demonstrate a huge interest towards the performance. Observing carefully the performance, I identified the use of low-Javanese language or *Bahasa Jawa ngapak*, a form of the Javanese language, which is widely spoken around Banyumas, as the main source of communication. Dancers were composed of female and/or male with a prior agreement between the host and performers. Narsih (50s), a female *lengger* from Pegalongan, Banyumas, revealed that the host

requested for one male dancer for the show to be funnier. All of them are dressed in female dance attire. The song repertoire consisted of only folk songs popular around Banyumas such as *Jemuah Wage*, *Sambel Kemangi*, while dance songs are such as *Eling-eling*, *Sekar Gadung*. This was the only one classic performance I witnessed. Nowadays, classic performances are a rare sight, because of a shift in the interest of people to more mixed performance of songs and dance. Such performances still exist in remote villages and one needs certain contacts and time to find them as they do not happen very so often.

Figure 1. *Lengger Klasik*, in Cunil village, Patikraja, Banyumas



Source: Personal documentation, 8 January 2023

Lengger Barangan

I first encounter with this rare variety of *lengger* was during a dance festival in Pandak, Baturaden (see Figure 2) on 19 November 2022. In one of the scenes of the festival, a classic duo, comprised of Daisah, a dancer, and Sukendar, an exquisite drum player performed for the audience *lengger barangan*. Sirwan (47 years), a manager of a local group, said that this variety of *lengger* can be classified as a street performance because it comprises of up to three artists – a dancer and a drummer (sometimes two) who go around villages and streets to perform in hope for seeking livelihood. In a casual conversation with Daisah (50s), who is a famous *lengger* dancer from Papringan, Banyumas, revealed that artists believe that they will be appreciated because of their performative skills. Indeed, those skills could be seen once Daisah started dancing, singing and doing comedy all at once during the Pandak Festival. In the performance there was intense communication between the artists. They joked, laughed, sang and conversed with no rehearsal beforehand. Their repertoire comprises of songs and laughs from everyday life of the Banyumas people – such as love, work, and religion. The costumes of Daisah and Sukendar were simple, consisting only of wearing *kemben*, traditional Javanese cloth, for the dancer, while the drummer is dressed in one-colour attire with a *blangkon*, a traditional hat. No strict set on costumes exists. *Barangan* performances are nowhere to be found today in Banyumas. Their existence is only reduced as an act part of a grander performance, just like this one of Daisah and Sukendar. I tried allocating another performance outside of the festival frame, but unfortunately with no success. This was my second performance, with the first comprising of Narsih and Sukendar, but once again as part of another festival, Jagad *Lengger* Festival that was held on 25 June 2022.

Figure 2. *Lengger Barangan*, in Pandak Village, Baturraden, Banyumas



Source: Personal documentation,
19 November 2022

Lengger Resmi

Another type of *lengger* is the official one. Here the example is from a political event that took place on 21 January 2023 (see Figure 3) where Rumah *Lengger* Banyumas was invited to perform. I selected the name official because dancers are invited to perform for the opening of an event such as seminar, conference, school ceremony, municipality event or a political rally. In the case of the performance here, it was introduced as a seminar, but speakers only talked about political topics, given that a year from that moment was the national general election of Indonesia. Sirwan (47 years), the manager of the performing group, stated that the performers are selected on the basis of the budget for the event and would perform up to 2 dances with prerecorded music, with or without musicians, usually at the beginning or closing with a total duration of no more than 30 minutes. Any details regarding the performances are agreed prior to the show. It is completely different compared to the classic one as only a couple of dance routines are performed, without any opening and comedy parts, even though the part of the giving tips and dancing with the dancer is present. Sometimes the dance routine can also be especially choreographed to fit the event. Visual data shows that the attire is still traditional, but some alternations can be seen to make the costumes more modern and visually intriguing.

Figure 3. Lengger Resmi, as part of social/political event, Sokaraja, Banyumas



Source: Personal documentation, 21 January 2023

Lengger Muslimah

This variety of *lengger* pertains to performances which are related to religious gatherings or executed in isolated and religious communities. As data gathered from a *lengger* performance in Ajibarang, Banyumas dated 12 February 2023 shows (see Figure 4a). In the case of this particular performance, it was mainly due to religiousness of the community. *Muslimah* is an Indonesian word that is used to describe the faithful and devoted Muslim woman who can be recognised by her specific attire – usually a headscarf with long dress with full sleeves. Rini (54 years), a dance school teacher and former *lengger* dancer, from Banyumas, says that *lengger Muslimah* performers must dress accordingly in order to accommodate the performance – they use costumes that cover all the body, including the wearing of a head scarf (see Figures 4a and 4b). In addition, the moves performed are not to be couquettish in nature, but demure, slow-paced and of the same kind. During this event, *sholawatan* lyrics are the preferred singing, with several dance songs of repertoire, such as *Sekar Gadung*. The presence of *rebana*, a small drum used in Islamic devotional music across Southeast Asia, can be seen (see Figure 4b) to accentuate on the religiousness. The music also resembles Islamic devotional music. Such performances are also rare to see since in Islam it is quite unheard of women going on stage and perform or boys, dressed as women, to perform in a religious context. However, due to the diverse and adaptive culture of the Javanese such exceptions take place and as example serve both acts on *Lengger Muslimah* captured by the authro – once in Ajibarang, Banyumas (see Figure 4a) and once as part of a festival in Pandak, Baturraden (see Figure 4b).

Picture 4a. *Lengger Muslimah*, as part of social event *Muslimah*



Source: Personal documentation, Ajibarang, Banyumas, 12 February 2023

Picture 4b. *Lengger*



as part of Pandak Festival, 19 November 2022

Lengger Garapan

Garap is an Indonesian word that means work, execute, do. Following this, this variety of *lengger* speaks about a dance routine that is specially created or choreographed. As my observations reveal, this type of *lengger* is especially preferred for an official event or competition as an original piece of work. Didit (48 years), an owner of a dance studio in Baturaden, Banyumas, with a big smile on his face shares that he has a lot of students who are really interested to learn *lengger* at his studio, but sadly they are not interested in the classic one. That is why Didit offers them a new approach, *lengger garapan* or new set of moves and songs that follow the *lengger* canon, but made more attractive for younger generations. He further says that there are a lot of young people, usually from schools, that seek his guidance in order to create dance routines and enroll in dance competitions. For such *garapan* routines, Didit also creates the costumes in his studio with the help of the members of the studio. The costumes are always vibrant, full of life, having a small or no resemblance to traditional *lengger* one. The music accompaniment, lyrics and duration are also unique for every performance, and are created with the support of skilful musicians in Banyumas. I frequently visited Didit's studio and indeed almost all of the time, there were young people learning *lengger*. I also identified that such choreographed routines are presented in big-scale events, such as the coming of an important guest. One of the most memorable events was the welcoming of Ganjar Pranowo, governor of Central Java, in Purwokerto on 14 May 2023. For that event, numerous dance groups collaborated together to create a *lengger garapan* routine (see Figure 5) that was watched by many people. In a nutshell, *lengger garapan* is a composer's take on *lengger*, introducing a trendier vision of the art, but still applying classic elements to it.

Figure 5. *Lengger Garapan*, preparation (left) in Purwokerto, Banyumas, 10 May 2023 and performance (right) in Pandak, Baturraden, Banyumas 19 November 2022



Source: Personal documentation

Lengger Calung Barongsai

In this variety of *lengger*, three different arts are combined to produce a unique piece of artistry. As a result of acculturation, mixing Javanese and Chinese cultures, this performance offers an interesting blend of music (*calung*) and dance (*lengger* and lion-style dance origination from China, known as *barongsai*). Such events are frequent, especially around Chinese New Year. In one of the events that I visited, entitled *Sokaraja Punya Cerita* (Sokaraja Has Stories) held on 11 February 2023 revealed to be a tremendous bustle of people and cultures. The event was a combination of colours and vigorous set of moves, accompanied by the enthusiasm of the audience. It involved the *lengger* dancers interacting with the *barongsai* – dancers were chased by the creature, they mounted it, or fed it, and all this happened under the rhythmic sounds of *calung*, *gong* and *cymbals*, traditional instruments of Java and China. The songs and attire of the dancers still follow the traditional canon (see Figure 6), but cross-cultural elements may exist to indicate a connection between cultures. To commemorate the event, the dancers gave red envelopes (*angpao*) to the audience who were expected to show appreciation in the forms of tips.

Figure 6. *Calengsai*, as part of social event, Sokaraja, Banyumas, 11 February 2023



Lengger Selingan

Based on observation, in some of the entertainment performances in Banyumas *lengger* is not the art in focus, but the art that compliments other performing arts, hence giving the title of *lengger selingan*. *Seling* can roughly be translated as taking turns, exchanging. Rusdi (45 years), a manager of dance group in Kali Tanjung, Rawalo, Banyumas, talks about the supportive function of *lengger* for other Javanese arts such as *wayang kulit*⁴ and *ebeg*⁵. He reveals that the purpose of *lengger* is to fill in the blank space, the *luft* that appears in between parts of the main puppet performance. An example for that is a *wayang kulit* performance (see Figure 7) that occurred on 13 September 2023 in Kali Tanjung, Rawalo, Banyumas, in which I also performed. In that performance, some of *lengger* dancers were also singers. Their function was to entertain the audience during the rests of *dalang*, puppeteer of *wayang kulit*. The *lengger* dancers along the musicians keep the interest of the audience with conversations, singing and dancing of traditional and popular songs. Often times the dancers interact with audience by inviting several people to dance on stage. During such performances more energetic songs such as *Bendrong Kulon*, *Renggong Manis*, *Pantai Logending*, *Sambal Kemangi* are preferred. The dancers are in full traditional dress called *kebaya* and are normally seated next to the musicians, chit chatting constantly while the whole performance goes. In those performances, *lengger* dancers have to show great stamina and perseverance as a puppet show commences around nine in the evening and continues to four in the morning.

Figure 7. *Lengger Selingan*, as part of a *wayang kulit* show, Tambak Negara, Rawalo, Banyumas



Source: Personal documentation, 13 September 2023

Lengger Campursari

This is the latest craze around the art of *lengger*. During my field research, this was the most adored source of entertainment of Banyumas' people for different events. In this performance several music and dance styles meet *lengger*.

⁴ Shadow puppet-theatre of Java.

⁵ A dance dedicated to warriors who used to serve Javanese kings. Its main characteristic is the ability of the dancers to fall into trance.

Campursari - a traditional Javanese music and *dangdut*, Indonesian mainstream pop-folk music, are mixed with *lengger*. For years now this type of performance of *lengger* has become the preferred one, suggesting a shift from the classic one to more modern one. Sirwan (47 years) revealed that people get bored with only watching *lengger* traditionally and they need some new trend push to hold their attention. He comments further that this is also a way to attract young audience to watch and get acquainted with traditional arts. With change in generations, *dangdut*-based hit songs are the preferred way of entertaining, leaving traditional songs in the back. That is why *lengger* evolved into *lengger campursari* as a way of celebrating weddings and circumcision ceremonies in rural areas of Banyumas. Examples of that are two wedding ceremonies - one in Binangun, Banyumas held on 4 January 2023, and one in Somagede, Banyumas, held on 7 November 2022 (see Figure 8). I was invited by Sirwan, who is also the manager of the performing group. In the program for the evening, the group performed dances (*lengger*) and contemporary music, singing hit songs. Some of those songs were *Lali Janjine*, *Bojo Loro*, *Rungkad*, *Gubuk Asmara*. Songs were performed by a singer, who can also be a skilful *lengger* dancer.

There were also the musicians and the traditional instruments. Sometimes those instruments are substituted with an electronic keyboard, and the whole performance relies on the keyboard and one drummer, thus showing versatility in terms of music, too. Electronic and prerecorded list of songs are showed to lower costs of the performance. Dancers still wear traditional clothes and can hold different positions, such as the master of ceremonies. The whole performance is flexible in nature, but still following the *lengger klasik* canon, or consisting of several parts.

Figure 8. *Lengger Campursari*, selected moments of two different performances from Binangun, Banyumas (right), on 4 Januari 2023 and Somagede, Banyumas (left) on 7 November 2022



Lengger Modern

With the passing of time, *lengger* has evolved to adopt modern interpretations through the hard work of contemporary artists such as Rianto. In their takes on

lengger, as I observed, the artist goes on a quest to touch sensitive topics such as personal spiritual journey of the body, the mystical elements of *lengger* or personal struggles. I had the chance to follow Rianto and his dance troupe to Australia and observe their performance called *Queer of Jawa* that was held on 5 March 2023 (see Figure 9). In that particular performance, Rianto and friends explore the long journey of becoming a *lengger* dancer, the spiritual and sensitive aspect to it. They further state that the art has no gender, and it is all white, pure and open to interpretations. By introducing abstract concepts, creative lighting and decorations, trendy costumes and unique computerly generated sounds, that differ greatly from the classic performance, the group managed to produce a spectacle that caught the standing ovations of the audience twice. Interesting about this is that the moves were completely *lengger klasik*, but danced to traditional music mixed with computer generated sounds that bring more surrealism to the whole performance. The group comprised of four dancers, but their stage presence and dedication were what caught the heart of the audience. Contemporary *lengger* is not a cup of tea for everyone as its main purpose is not entertaining, but as Rianto (42 years) argues, is to rather deep question the already established moral values and understandings of Indonesian society by showing traditional arts that somehow lost their limelight moments.

Figure 9. *Lengger Modern* in focus of the performance *Queer of Jawa*, Sydney, Australia, 5 March 2023



- **Behind *Lengger's* Performance**

It is important to record the varieties of *lengger* performances, because through that varieties, a portrait of the social scene of Banyumas can be drawn. Through a simple reflection on the arts one can see the people's characteristics and interests. I managed to identify some important points regarding this through identifying the variety in the *lengger* performances.

First of all, the above-mentioned interviews with Sirwan, Narsih, Sigit and Rini, and my observations focus on the entertaining factor of *lengger*, and how the *campursari* and *klasik* performances (see Figures 1 and 7) have become more profane. However, those informants also stress on the community factor, that still preserves local traditions, but at the same time adapts and progresses, following

mainstream national and international trends, by introducing new elements such as songs, attire, musical instruments, as well as duration of performance. Despite the performances starting to rely on more contemporary and global rhythms, the art keeps attracting the community, says Sirwan (47 years) which is a way to reserve the art. Based on observations and words from the above informants, the inherent dynamic of the *lengger* performance, combined with traditionalness in modern time can be considered as Banyumas' forte, which can easily be applied to soft diplomacy, and promoting the region.

The *lengger selingan* and *calengsai* performances accentuate the peaceful cohabitations of people and culture, which is in general is encoded in Indonesia's national philosophy. The *lengger garapan* on its end shows that Banyumas' entertainment scene possesses lots of powerful and creative artists who dedicate time and knowledge to develop the art and talk about topics that rarely become topics of discussion. In *lengger muslimah*, as Rini (54 years) shares, through lyrics and costumes, people get to see the importance of religion in Banyumasan people's life and how that religion transcends to arts and influences them. Otniel Tasman (30s), a *lengger* dancer from Banyumas and famous choreographer, comments on how choreographers convey traditional wisdoms, abstract approaches and worldviews of Javanese people to the outer, non-Javanese admirers, in hopes to popularise and preserve the art through *lengger modern*.

If a line is drawn, it can be concluded that because of its many varieties the art successfully adapted new variations of its performative frame in the 21st century. Being oral, dynamic and instinctive, as Rusdi (45 years) and Sirwan (47 years) explained, it manages to fill in the blanks in special social events in Banyumas effortlessly. This way it can be preserved and continued in generations. However, as I personally noticed, performing *lengger* requires courage because of contestations that may rise around the performance and dancers. This is primarily related to religious views and family moral systems in Java, which have direct influence on the dancers. For example, female dancers may face harsh comments for showing their *aurat*⁶ or even be brave to dance on stage.⁷ People studying the Javanese dances know that female costumes have definite set of rules – for example upper part of the body, above the breasts remains uncovered, as well as the hands. No headscarf is used to cover head. In terms of men dancers – just the idea of a man performing dressed as woman produces a series of comments questioning the behaviour and sexuality of the performers, but as Sigit (23 years), a dancer from Baturraden, exclaimed “*masa bodoh*” (indifferent) in response to my question of how he feels in those situations. Most performers do not pay attention to that and it is seen from their eagerness to dance. Going against one's *kodrat*⁸ is also considered a sin in Islam. Nevertheless, *lengger* performances are actually

⁶ *Aurat* is parts of the body of the human body that needs to be covered and not covering them suggest committing a sin.

⁷ In one of the field trips of the author he visited a *lengger* performance in Somagede, Banyumas, but no dancers were allowed on stage as it was thought that a woman dancing is not according to Islamic values, likewise wearing open clothes.

⁸ *Kodrat* translates as the human's nature as decided by God.

really enjoyed across Banyumas and they still remain an integral part of the entertainment scene.

4. Conclusion

In this article I shed a light on the meanings and performances of *lengger* as well as their trajectories in Banyumas' society. *Lengger* is a traditional art of Banyumas that welcomes all genders to perform on different occasions. Its uniqueness is found in the fact that it has a cross-dressing element. The art is oral, dynamic, and instinctive which underlines its flexibility and adaptability.

I identified at least nine varieties of the *lengger* performance, namely *lengger klasik*, *lengger barangan*, *lengger resmi*, *lengger muslimah*, *lengger garapan*, *lengger calung barongsai*, *lengger selingan*, *lengger campursari*, and *lengger modern*.

Identifying the richness of the *lengger* performance, some characteristics of Banyumas' people are identified, such as love for the community, adaptability, dynamism, creativity, devotion to faith, and aspiration to promote their local culture, nationally as well as internationally. Through a thick description of the portrait of a *lengger* performance one can feel and dive into Banyumas' culture, understanding the society even deeper. *Lengger Banyumas* is continuously developing, adapting and assimilating new trends so that the art keeps thriving and preserving.

Through this paper, I desire to raise awareness on the importance of studying arts. At the same time, I wish to ignite interest in other researchers to dig deeper into Banyumas' art and identifying even broader social structures and trends. For future research, focusing on studying each variety of *lengger* separately is needed. This might bring a more comprehensive understanding towards the development of Indonesian rural society and arts because of the encoded principles that lie behind the beautiful dance moves of the performers and dance's philosophy.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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