

# Soleh Adi Pramono: A Malangese Mask Puppet Dalang (1951-Present)

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**Abstract.** The Malangese Mask Puppet art has given birth to a number of famous *dalangs* and artists, including *Mbah* Reni from Polowijen and *Mbah* Karimun from Kedungmonggo, whose invaluable contributions to the development and sustainability of the traditional art are not to be questioned. Soleh Adi Pramono from Gladahdowo, manager of *Padepokan* (Art Center) Mangun Dharmo, is also a *dalang* who continues the life-long project of his predecessors, namely to preserve the Malangese Mask Puppet art. This article discusses Soleh as a figure and his philosophical view about the *uger*, *mengku*, and *megeng*, the processes involved in the making of puppet masks. Masks play a central role in the Malangese mask puppet art, but very few studies have discussed the philosophical aspect of the making of puppet masks. The study is based on the data obtained by an interview with Soleh Adi Pramono on 8 February 2019 at *Padepokan* Mangun Dharmo.

**Keywords:** Malangese Mask Puppet; Puppeteer; and Soleh Adi Pramono

## 1 Introduction

Soleh was born in a family of *dalangs* and artists. Currently, Soleh is still actively engaged in efforts to preserve several traditional arts originating from Malang including the Malangese mask puppet. Mask puppet is a traditional art that presents the so-called *Lakon Panji* (based on works written by ancient Javanese men of letters) that developed during the era of the Javanese kingdoms [5].

The Malangese mask puppet is a style of mask puppet that grew and developed in Malang and has spread to other places, for example Jabung, Tumpang, and Pakisaji<sup>[4]</sup>. Each of these puppet styles, however, has different characteristics. The word “*malangan*” refers to the mask puppet art that flourishes in Malang Regency East Java. Prasetyo (2014) also uses the term “*malangan*” to name other types of art originating from Malang such as *wayang topeng malangan* or *ludruk malangan* [6]. Currently, *Dalang* Soleh is manager of *Padepokan* (Art Center) Mangun Dharmo. Today, he still actively writes books, speaks in seminars, engages in researches as a resource person, and manages performances in local, national, and international events.

Padepokan Mangun Dharmo is located in Tulus Besar Village, Tumpang Sub-district, at the foot of Mt. Tengger, about 16 miles from downtown Malang. Made of wood with decorative carvings, the *padepokan* building stands on a piece of higher ground amidst the surrounding green trees. A capacious *pendopo* structure in the middle of the art center complex serves as the theater where mask puppet performances are held. Established on 26 August 1989, the *padepokan* itself is a home to not only the Malangese mask puppet, but also traditional Malangese music, dance, and theater, *macapat*, *dalang*-ship, and wayang kulit (shadow puppet) [7].



**Figure 1.** Padepokan Mangun Dharmo, Tulus Besar Village, Tumpang Sub-district, Malang Regency, Pictures taken on 8 February 2019 by Arining Wibowo

According to Dalang Soleh (interview on 8 February 2019), to become a *dalang* one has to be at least 40 years of age. He has to attend a dance department instead and learn to master the *dalang* skills at the same time. That was actually how Dalang Soleh came to master *dalang*, music, and dancing skills altogether. Dalang Soleh lives to continue the legacy of the *dalangs* before him, who were for their mastery in art of *dalangship*, dance, music, and *topeng* (mask) design and creation.



**Figure 2.** Dalang and artist Soleh Adi Pramono at his residence on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2019 Photo by: Arining Wibowo

Dalang Soleh Adi Pramono was born 68 years ago on 1 August 1951 in Wonomulyo Hamlet, Poncokusumo Sub-district, Malang Regency. After graduating high school in 1972, Soleh attended KONRI (Indonesian Karawitan Conservatory). From 1975 to 1979 he worked as a technical staff member of the Cultural Division of the Ministry of Education and Culture. In 1979, Soleh entered the Dance Department at Institut Seni Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Institute of Art) and graduated as a Bachelor of Dance Art in 1984. Dalang Soleh also learned the Malangese mask puppet art from several renowned artists and dalangs in Malang, including his grandfather Tirtowinoto, Mbah Karimun, Mbah Samoed, Mbah Rasimun, Mbah Kimun, and Mbah Jakinem. When interviewed on 8 February 2019 at his residence, Dalang Soleh also explained that he also had an opportunity to study art in Madura, singing parts of some Madurese songs after his explanation. Soleh Adi Pramono is the son of Mbah Roesman, himself an artist and dancer. Art(istry) is handed down from one generation to another in Soleh's family. Soleh's own son Supriyono currently studies dalangship and is actively engaged in art activities at the art center. Supriyono is Soleh's most avid discussion partner and closest family member. With Supriyono as future heir of Mangun Dharmo Art Center, Mangun Dharmo Art Center has proven its success in consistently continuing the legacy of dalangship to the younger generation. Many other art centers are not as successful as Mangun Dharmo in this respect. Both Mangun Dharmo Art Center and Dalang Soleh's family have [7].

Between 1984 and 1992 Dalang Soleh pursued an academic career as a lecturer at IKIP Malang (now Malang State University/UM). According to Schrieber (2014) Soleh is also known as an elite choreographer whose dance creations consistently follow the traditional dance structure. Soleh decided to quit teaching at IKIP Malang in 1992 and chose to focus on his activities as an artist. A profile of Soleh in the book *Drama Tari Wayang Topeng Malang* (1997) mentions that Soleh once had an opportunity to train foreign students from Japan and America under a collaboration scheme with Universitas Merdeka Malang [2]. A number of books, theses, and dissertations have been written on the process and experience of learning of foreign students who learn and study traditional dance directly from Soleh or other artists in Tumpang area.

Soleh (interviewed on 8 February 2019) admitted that foreign students from America, Canada, Spain, and France came to study individually or collectively representing certain institutions.

Dalang Soleh has articulated his philosophical views on traditional art, including mask puppet, in his books, in seminars, and by practicing the art itself. Based on the interview with Dalang Soleh on 8 February 2019, there are still some thoughts that he has yet to speak much about, including his thoughts about mask making and the values behind the process. According to Soleh, there are three steps to make a puppet mask: *uger*, *mengku*, and *megeng*. Because of these steps, Malangese puppet masks are considered to be sacred artistic pieces laden with philosophical values [1].

## 2 Method

This study uses a qualitative method with three data collection techniques, namely interviews, observation, and document studies. The study was conducted periodically from September 2017 to 2019. Interviews were conducted with important figures in the puppet mask art of Malang, Soleh Adi Pramono (prominent puppeteer, leader of Mangu Dharma Art Center / one of Karimun students). Observations are carried out periodically from 2017-2019 by participating in various activities related to the shadow puppet mask such as performances, exhibitions, festivals, seminars, workshops, or joint discussions held both in art center, tourist destinations (including hotels, restaurants and museums), or other places that are relevant to the puppet mask art of Malang. Document studies are carried out by accessing documents that can complement and provide alternative data for this research both in the library or in private documents from informants/ respondents. This study combines the three data collection techniques in order to provide more comprehensive research results.

## 3 Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Modification of Performance and Mask Dance

The puppeteer is the person who creates the story and gamelan music played by the *pengrawit* is a part of prayer and is sacred in the malangan puppet performance of Malang (Soleh Adi Pramono, interview on February 8<sup>th</sup>, feb). The absence of the puppeteer and *pengrawit* in mask dance performances and replaced by tape recorders in dance performances in tourist destinations marks the changes (modifications) that occur in the traditional arts. This modification has caused a loss of synchronization and collaboration between the puppeteer, the scorer, and the dancer in the malangan mask puppet performance. This modification also removes the important and philosophical nature of the puppeteers and scavengers which results in the loss of sacredness. In previous eras, the style of conveying and intonation of the puppeteer was one of the attractions for the community, in addition to the dancing ability displayed by dancers (puppets). Modifications caused by technological advancements by the appearance of recorded tapes erased the complex nature of the malangan mask puppet show. The role of CDs and recordings removes the mastery of the stage from the puppeteer, *pengrawit* and puppet children belong to only one or several mask dancers [9].

### 3.2 Modification of Mask Craft

*Dalang* Soleh Adi Pramono (interview on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019) mentioned the use of wood as a form of representation of the *kinaryo* show, which means that the mask puppet show teaches goodness through performances. The use of wood as a material for making masks provides an opportunity for ancestors to come back to life with the aim of spreading goodness. Masks made of wood become an expression of the spirit of ancestors. Through the show then teachings on soil fertility and the economy, as well as other aspects of social life are taught. Modification of the material for making masks from wood into other materials, and from selected wood to other woods eliminates the philosophical value of masks [8].

In addition to eliminating the philosophical value of wood, modification also removes the philosophical value of the mask itself. In the puppet mask art of Malang, the mask occupies a central position and holds the value of sacredness. The mask is considered like a soul (*sukma*) that moves the human body so that there is life. When dancing, the mask moves the dancer's body and not vice versa. Dancers have a narrow line of sight, a mouth that is locked and not talking, as well as inhuman breathing but can display dance moves and good stage mastery because the mask is moving the dancers. Then the mask must be worn by dancers (puppets) in the show so that philosophical values can be conveyed. The mask released from the dancer's face symbolizes the soul coming out of the human body and left lying around. Masks that are modified and produced for the purpose of selling and displaying remove the philosophical value of the mask as a symbol of the human soul and life [10].

Soleh Adi Pramono explained further (interview on February 8, 2019) that the basic colors of the mask only consist of four, namely white, red, yellow, and blue, each of which symbolizes the direction of the wind, the four colors when mixed will produce green. Green is the color of the mask of Panji Asmoro Bangun, as the central character in Panji puppets. The mask coloring process initially used natural ingredients while the current mask is colored using acrylic paint, wall paint, watercolor, poster paint, oil paint, with varnish oil. The coloring process is easier and has many color options [3].

## 4 Conclusion

The modification of the puppet mask art in Malang changed several important things that were sacred and philosophical in the traditional arts, both in the aspect of performance and craft of the mask. However, modification has become a cultural phenomenon that cannot be avoided by art and the perpetrators in the modern era. The development of technology and information that changes the way of viewing and lifestyle of the community also influences people's attitudes towards traditional and local arts. The shadow puppet art of Malang which was once an important part of the life of the people of Malang and its surroundings was then reintroduced by the performers of art and other stake holders, but by modifying a number of standards (rules of tradition) so that they could adapt to modern society. In the midst of the dominance of popular culture (pop), the preservation and preservation of traditional arts is considered as an urgency rather than fixated on the rules of tradition. Traditional art must be dynamic and not steady so that modern society can recognize the art.

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