

Sintren Dance, Women, and Power Contestation on the North Coast of Java

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper aims to describe a traditional dance in the northern coastal region of Java and the local power dynamics that surround it. The existence of *sintren*, which resembles the role of women, is desirable for further study. Previous research on this topic has not been studied.

Methods: This research utilizes desk research supported by relevant references regarding the "*sintren*" dance based on research reports, records, Javanese literature, reference books, and others.

Results: Understanding the "*sintren*" dance is not sufficient by observing the twisting movements of the woman's body using all the dance costumes, but there are many aspects of the surrounding local power. Over time, the "*sintren*" has evolved significantly. Initially, the "*sintren*" was a means of narrating the love story of couples. Since then, women have taken on a leading role as dancers and mythical figures in the local community. With the development of society, the "*sintren*" has lived amidst ethnic diversity. Some groups do not perform it due to the mystical elements, while others perform it because the "*sintren*" serves in spreading noble values and aesthetics. The "*sintren*" exists amidst multicultural communities with diverse ethnicities. This is the competitive ability that cannot be avoided in the "*sintren*" and surrounds its development..

Conclusions: This research emphasizes the importance of making the "*sintren*" a shared property and considering it a valuable cultural heritage, therefore, preserving the "*sintren*" is necessary. At the same time, there is interest in recognizing the role of women in the development of the "*sintren*".

Keywords: Sintren, power, women, ethnicity.

رقصة سينترين، والمرأة، والتنافس على القدرة في المنطقة الساحلية الشمالية من جاوى

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ملخص

الأهداف: يهدف هذا البحث ليصف رقصة تقليدية في المنطقة الساحلية الشمالية من جزيرة جاوى، وقدرة المحلية المحيطة بها. أن وجود السينترين الذي يتماثل لدور المرأة مرغوب في دراسته. ولم يتم دراسة هذا الموضوع حسب اطلاع الباحثة. **المنهجية:** يستخدم هذا البحث البحث المكتبي مدعوم بالمراجع المتعلقة عن رقصة سينترين بناءً على التقارير البحثية والسجلات وكتاب الأدب الجاوية، والكتب المرجعية وغير ذلك.

النتائج: لفهم في رقصة سينترين لا يكفي في رؤيتها من إلتواء حركات جسد المرأة مع استخدام جميع زي الرقص؛ لكن هناك العديد من قدرة المحلية المحيطة، وبمرور الوقت، مر سينترين بأشياء كثيرة. في البداية، كان سينترين وسيلة في قصة إلقاء حب الزوجين. ومنذ ذلك، أخذت المرأة دورًا قياديًا، كراقصات وكشخصيات أسطورية في المجتمع المحلي. ومع تطور المجتمع، عاش السينترين وسط تنوع عرقي. ومن ثم بعض المجموعات لا تؤديه بسبب عناصر الصوفية، ويؤديه بعض الآخر؛ لأن سينترين ينفع في نشر الدين والقيم الشريفة والجمالية. يعيش سينترين وسط مجتمعات متعددة الثقافات ذات أعراق متنوعة. هذا هو تنافس القدرة الذي لا يمكن تجنبه بسينترين ويحيط في تطوير سينترين.

الخلاصة: تؤكد هذا البحث على أهمية جعل سينترين كملكية مشتركة وباعتبارها تراثًا ثقافيًا قيمًا، فلا بد من الحفاظ على سينترين. وفي وقت ساوي، هناك الاهتمام في اعتراف دور المرأة في تطوير سينترين.

الكلمات الدالة: سينترين، القدرة، المرأة، العرق.

1. Introduction

The emergence and development of traditional dance cannot be understood without considering the local context in which it exists. The local context naturally encompasses political issues. This local power dynamic can influence the dance and create a space of contestation. Giurchescu (2001) explains that dance can express the essence of social interaction, and its structure is culturally determined concerning social, historical, and environmental factors. When women perform *sintren* dance, the power dynamics related to local culture might be complex, especially considering that many women worldwide are still not equal to men due to strong patriarchal cultures. This paper aims to describe a traditional dance on the north coast of Java, namely *sintren*, and the local power dynamics that surround it. In light of these objectives, the author posits the presence of diverse local influences impacting the existence and progression of *sintren*. This assertion forms a research hypothesis.

Previous studies on traditional dance in various parts of Java have been conducted. For instance, Heru Santosa's (2013) study examines *dolalak* dance in Purworejo, Central Java. The study discussed the role of women and the influence of Islam. Marwah et al. (2020) also reflect on the historical significance of *dolalak* dance as a traditional dance in the Bagelen region of Purworejo. It is said that the *Dolalak* dance originated from the singing and dancing movements of soldiers during the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia, particularly during their rest time. The term 'dolalak' is derived from the spelling of the notes *do la la*, expressing both singing and body movements for entertainment. Then, Caturwati (2006) conducted a study on the cultural history of *ronggeng* dance in West Java. The "ronggeng" dance originates from the legend of a woman disguised as a dancer who traveled to various regions in West Java to seek revenge for the death of her lover. Currently, *ronggeng* is often performed at large community celebrations.

Meanwhile, Pemberton's (2003) study related to traditional dance explains that almost all Javanese communities have traditional dances associated with Dewi Sri, with different versions of the figure and forms of worship. The dance is called *gandrung* by the people of the far east of Java, *lengger* by the Banyumas people in southwest Java, *tayub* by the people of the north coast of Java, and *jaipongan* in West Java. The various dances mentioned are integral to the rituals of agricultural communities across Java. These traditional dances hold profound significance in the lives of farmers, serving as a means to preserve cosmic balance for the well-being of the primary source of life—the earth. In traditional Javanese beliefs, the earth is symbolized as the embodiment of fertility, represented by the figure of Dewi Sri. Javanese communities consider Dewi Sri as the goddess safeguarding rice planting processes, land management, rain requests, and even the safety of livestock. Aligned with this belief, diverse artistic traditions accompany events that pay tribute to Dewi Sri.

Sadly, *sintren* dance on the north coast of Java is not mentioned by Pemberton, although it is spread on the north coast of central and western Java. The origin story of *sintren* is different from the other traditional dances associated with the story of Dewi Sri, as commonly found in almost all corners of rural communities in Java. Thus, this difference provides an interesting area for further exploration. Existing studies on *sintren* dance focus on the meaning of *sintren* spirituality by Zulfikar and Abidin (2016), the development of *sintren* by Laura Andri (2019), and the perception of *sintren* dancers towards the dance by Jody and Mayangsari (2019). By following the line of thought from Giurchescu (2001) as mentioned above, this study suspects the existence of various local power contestations surrounding *sintren*. However, the power contestation that can arise along with the existence and development of *sintren* has not been studied by many previous researchers. Therefore, it is the focus of this study.

For the people of Pekalongan, *sintren* has a special meaning since it has been designated by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (WTB) of the Pekalongan Regency. The designation was issued on January 1, 2013, with Registration Number 2013003560. According to data from Pekalongan District Education and Culture Office (2022), there are currently 26 dance groups spread across Doro, Kajen, Kesesi, Bojong, Wiradesa, Kedungwuni, Talun, Petungkriyono, Karanganyar, and Sragi sub-districts. This number is much smaller compared to the number during the *sintren* golden age.

Sintren in Pekalongan lives in the tradition of a coastal community that has a more dynamic cultural life. Coastal communities are known to have relatively egalitarian values and less clear social stratification as seen in central Javanese

society (Yogyakarta-Solo). According to local cultural practitioner Ribut Ahmadi (in Marwah et al., 2021), their language structure is also open and unstructured. This means that in terms of the conversation between younger and older people, they do not use honorific but colloquial language. Similarly, in terms of social stratification, they do not have a sharp social stratum as the central Javanese society does.

However, unraveling the cultural construction of coastal communities such as Pekalongan is complicated, as they have experienced the acculturation of Javanese, Arabic, and Chinese cultures for hundreds of years. Lombard's (2008) study illustrates that Pekalongan is one of the areas on the north coast of Java with cross-cultural experience, especially Javanese, Arabic, and Chinese influences. Hence, dimensional contact among Javanese, Arab, and Chinese ethnicities is inevitable. This acculturation dates back centuries since the north coast of Java became one of the centers of international trade.

Pekalongan region has been one of the centers of maritime commerce since the 15th century when Chinese traders began to enter along the north coast of Java. The entry of Chinese traders into the region may have occurred much earlier, in the 6th century. In addition to being a trading center, the region became the first target when Islam began to enter Java. Vlekke's study (2015) shows that since the 15th century, the areas of Cirebon, Demak, and Jepara located along the north coast of central Java have been controlled by Muslim rulers. This included the areas of Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya on the north coast of eastern Java. At that time, many Muslim traders came from Gujarat. The Muslim merchants not only trade but also spread Islam. In the end, many of the traders, both Chinese and Muslim, settled down and mingled with the local population. To this day, Javanese, Arab, and Chinese communities live side by side in the northern region of Java, especially in Pekalongan.

In line with the aims and hypotheses of this research, which aim to present the power contestation in local communities related to women and *sintren* dance, this article is divided into two main parts. The first part examines the history of the birth and development of *sintren*, which is in contact with local traditions and culture. This is a significant part since the birth and development of *sintren* seem to "give space" to the contribution of women. The first part emphasizes the local power surrounding the birth and development of *sintren*, particularly highlighting the contribution of women in its inception and development. The historical narrative and the transmission of knowledge seem to favor women. Then, the second part explains the development of *sintren* among the ethnic diversity of Pekalongan society, namely Javanese, Arabic, Chinese, and others. This section describes the ethnic diversity in Pekalongan, which has been formed for a long time. There are also various views on local cultural arts and the description of cultural acculturation in some communities, which are worth investigating as well. The second part emphasizes that in the development of *sintren*, the local power surrounding it is influenced by the expanding reach of Islam, resulting in a divided perspective on *sintren*. On one hand, *sintren* is considered mystical, while on the other hand, Islam accommodates local traditions. Furthermore, *sintren* flourishes among various ethnicities, including Arab and Chinese communities.

2. Research Method

This article is based on literature research. According to Mary W George (2008), literature research is a type of research that collects data by studying and analyzing various sources related to the problem, theoretical backgrounds, books, documents, official websites, research reports, and so on. The literature research used in this study can support the formulation of the research problem, namely whether there is local influence surrounding the existence and development of the *sintren* dance as a local cultural heritage of the people in Pekalongan.

Pekalongan was chosen as the focus of this research because it was once a central region. In 1903, as part of the Ethical Policy, the Dutch colonial government divided many regions into Karesidenan (*gewest*) and Kota Besar (*gumentee*). This policy continued until the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. Today, Pekalongan is divided into two administrative regions, Pekalongan Regency and Pekalongan City, both of which belong to the province of Central Java.

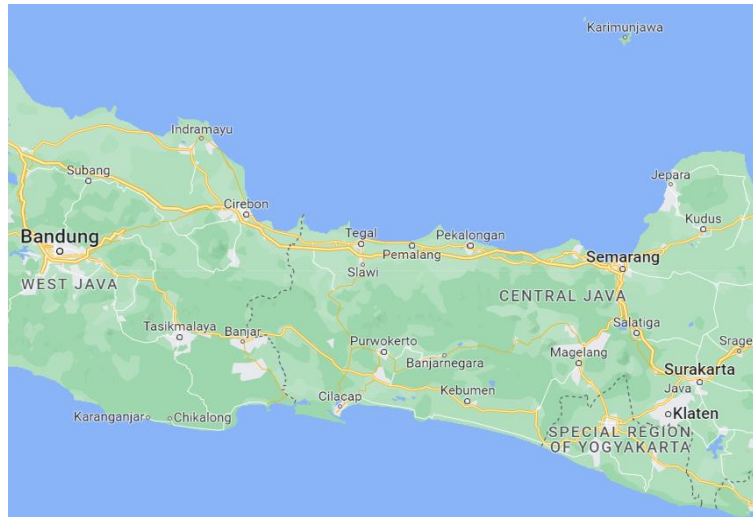


Figure 1: The map of Pekalongan in Central Java

Source: google map, 2023

Furthermore, after collecting data and information, the author synchronizes them with relevant theories. Data processing follows David M Silbergh's (2001) approach, beginning with the process of data classification and continuing with the theoretical abstraction of the obtained information. In this context, the researcher delved into the research hypothesis, specifically focusing on the presence of local influence surrounding the existence and development of *sintren* dance as a local cultural heritage among the people in Pekalongan. To conduct an in-depth investigation and obtain answers to this hypothesis, the researcher carried out an exploration based on relevant data and theory. The aim was to produce findings indicating the presence of various local influences surrounding the existence and development of *sintren* dance, particularly in Pekalongan. Utilizing theory as a relevant conceptual framework can help enrich the interpretation of data and information in the analysis, ensuring that conclusions can be effectively presented.

3. The Birth and Dynamics of *Sintren*: A Women-oriented Tendency

Giurchescu (2001) explains that the study of dance becomes urgent when a dance is part of a whole network of social events, as well as part of a system of knowledge, beliefs, social behavior, norms, and aesthetic values. Although there are drawbacks in fully presenting what Giurchescu conveys above, it is expected that the data and information of this study will be sufficient to illustrate this.

Explaining the origins of the *sintren* dance proves to be quite challenging. *Sintren*'s story and dynamics have significantly developed due to its oral traditions. As with many other historical and cultural heritages in Indonesia, local people are closer to oral traditions than written ones. Only in recent years, some efforts have been made to collect bits of stories and information about disorganized *sintren*.

The word "*sintren*", in some versions, comes from the words "*si*" or she, and "*tren*" or "*tri*" which means daughter (Kemdikbud, 2022). This meaning implies that *sintren* gives a specific space to women. In another meaning, *sintren* is said to come from the Sanskrit word "*sintru*" which means quiet. Local cultural figure Agus Sulisty (undated) admits that finding historical sources as primary evidence, as well as literacy data regarding the origins of *sintren*, is laborious.

Sintren is a widely spread cultural product, especially in the border areas of Central Java and West Java Provinces. This traditional dance has very complex historical roots and is interpreted in various local cultural contexts. In the West Java province, the *sintren* dance is more widespread in the Cirebon regency (Jody & Mayangsari, 2019). As for Central Java, *sintren* expands across several regencies such as Brebes, Pemalang, and Pekalongan regencies.

In Pekalongan, based on the story told in the community, *sintren* has a connection with the aristocracy of the Mataram

Kingdom, such as King Sultan Agung and Tumenggung Bahureksa.¹ In addition, *sintren* is also related to local figures in Pekalongan, such as Dewi Rantamsari, Sulasih, and Sulandono. It seems that there are no Pekalongan people who do not know about this. In the Chronicle of Pekalongan, it is mentioned that there are two versions of the history of *sintren*. The first version is based on the love story of Sulasih and Sulandono (son of Tumenggung Bahureksa), which was not approved by their parents. The second version is based on the story of Tumenggung Bahureksa's romance with Dewi Rantamsari, which was not approved by Sultan Agung, the King of Mataram.

Refers to the first version, *sintren* dance contains the mythology of Sulasih who was separated from her lover Sulandono. There is no sufficient explanation as to why the couple did not get the blessing. However, both of them may come from different circles, namely the man from the palace and the woman is a commoner. This assumption is since Sulandono was a noble son of the Mataram Kingdom. *Sintren* dance then moves as a medium to bring the two together through the cosmological world.

The dance depicts Sulasih, who is innocent and decent, after being tied up and locked up in a coop, transforming into a beautiful princess. For the process of entering the realm of the angel Dewi Rantamsari, it is said that the dancer needs to purify herself and must be able to present silence in her mind symbolized by entering the coop to detach herself from the outside world. The ritual process towards the world of silence is related to the word "*sintru*" in Sanskrit which means silence as the origin of the word *sintren* dance (Agus Sulisty, no year).

Indeed, *sintren* is inseparable from the legend of Dewi Rantamsari. She is a spiritual legend of a female queen who rules the north sea of Java and is sometimes referred to as Dewi Lanjar. She is also known as a merchant. The Pekalongan community is known for being dominated by merchants or entrepreneurs since the region became one of the centers of maritime commerce starting in the 6th century when Chinese traders began to enter along the north coast of Java and later Gujarati traders. According to cultural expert Ibnu Novel (in Marwah, 2021), the people of Pekalongan are typical traders or entrepreneurs who are creative and independent, supported by their work ethic. Therefore, the spiritual legend of Dewi Rantamsari, known as a trader or entrepreneur, seems to link the lives of local people who are dominated by traders with the legendary story of a trader or entrepreneur in their cosmological world. It is even believed that on certain days, the figure of Dewi Rantamsari "appears" while shopping in traditional markets in Pekalongan.

The flow of the *sintren* performance begins with the appearance of the *pesinden* (traditional singer) who sing songs accompanied by the sound of *gamelan* (traditional musical instruments). The instruments supporting *sintren* include *waditra*, *gendang*, and *gong*. All three are also traditional musical instruments. The songs are also a way to gather the community and a sign that the event is about to begin. The main performance is the *sintren* dance, where the dancer in plain clothes is brought to the stage by the charmer burning incense. Next, the *sintren* dancer sits down and is tied with a rope and covered with a black cloth-wrapped chicken coop. Inside the coop, good clothes and makeup tools are provided. At that time, the charmer continues to burn incense and cast spells.

Sintren who has come out of the coop means that she is ready to dance. The dance movements are lively and inviting. She invites the audience to join in and goes into a trance. She continues to dance until the performance is over. When she dances, the audience usually throws small objects like money which makes her fall unconscious. The dancer is then approached by the charmer who repeats the spell, and this scene will take place repeatedly during the performance process (Ilyas & Abidin, 2016).

¹ The Mataram Kingdom was the largest Islamic kingdom ever established on the island of Java. Founded in the mid-16th century, it reached the peak of its glory during the time of King Sultan Agung. His authority covered most of Java, including Central Java, Yogyakarta, a significant portion of West Java, and East Java. Sultan Agung also exerted control over Madura Island, West Kalimantan, Makasar Sulawesi, and Sumatra Island (Palembang and Jambi). Following Sultan Agung's death, the power of the Mataram Kingdom began to decline, concurrent with the rise of Dutch colonial influence in Java. Legally, the Mataram Kingdom ceased to exist when it was divided into Surakarta and Yogyakarta in 1755 through the Giyanti Agreement, which was heavily influenced by Dutch colonial interference. Meanwhile, Tumenggung Bahurekso, one of the local rulers under Mataram rule, was responsible for the north coast of Java Island, overseeing the areas of Pekalongan, Jepara, Kendal, Batang, Pemalang, Tegal, and Brebes. Further exploration of the Mataram Kingdom, Sultan Agung, and Tumenggung Bahurekso can be found in works such as Ricklefs (2011); and Chronicle of Pekalongan Regency (2017).

The center point of *sintren* dance is the woman. The *sintren* dancer must be an unmarried girl as an absolute requirement. In its personification, the *sintren* dancer depicts innocence and simplicity, which later transforms into a beautiful princess. The figure of the *sintren* dancer depicts purity and presents silence in her mind, symbolized by entering the coop to disengage herself from the outside world. Therefore, according to cultural practitioner Ribut Achmadi, *Sintren* dance holds a deep meaning related to women's power. The need for *sintren* dancers to be played by a pure woman illustrates the importance of women maintaining their dignity (see Marwah et al., 2021). Women must maintain their honor by upholding purity and therefore can attain a higher position in society.



Figure 2. Sintren Dance

Source, hsn97.wordpress.com

From the local perspective, *sintren* is believed to encompass fundamental meanings, including aesthetic value, religious significance, and respect value. The aesthetic allure of *sintren* is attributed to its beautiful movements. Dancers adorn themselves in colorful and striking costumes, turning the beauty of *sintren* into a source of entertainment for the local community. Consequently, *sintren* is frequently showcased at various events such as wedding celebrations, circumcisions, or as a welcoming performance at government events. Nevertheless, *sintren* is also performed at specific times, particularly during the long dry season, where it is perceived as a ritual to summon rain (Kemdikbud, 2022).

The religious values portrayed in *sintren* are embodied in the traditional songs accompanying the dance, which contain religious guidance for life—guidance applicable to relationships between humans and the connection between humans and God. Additionally, emphasizing the value of honor, the *sintren* dance is expected to be performed by a holy woman, illustrating the importance for women to uphold their dignity (Marwah, et al., 2021).

The shared knowledge of *sintren*, *Sulasih*, and the legends of Dewi Rantamsari persists among local communities today. This illustrates that women are integral to the transmission of knowledge and culture across generations. Understanding this fact is undeniable. Many studies highlight the significant role of women in cultural preservation. Stache's (2023) study depicts women as guardians of culture through the cultural practices they engage in; Honkavuo's (2021) research indicates that the family plays a crucial role in passing on traditions and culture; Dudgeon & Bray's (2019) study emphasizes the robust influence of women's governance in traditional societies, supporting cultural diversity, harmonization, and contributing to social welfare.

This not only reflects how the history of the region has grown and developed but also how local legends have evolved within the community. As a growing traditional art in coastal areas, it is time for women as *sintren* dancers to become the mainstream of shared knowledge. This is important from the point of view of cultural inheritance, as the history and culture that we inherit are often colored by the characterization that focuses on who was prominent at a certain time. So far, history

has often portrayed men as the main parties who played an important role in the formation of something or a certain historical momentum. The public memory of women's contributions to history and development is still filled with less positive things. Women are mostly remembered for their role in the struggle for the throne, for being beautiful or evil, and not for their abilities and essential contributions. For *sintren* dance, it seems that the involvement of women as an important part of the birth of *sintren* is still quite visible. The prospect is that what many women do can have a legitimizing function. History can function to legitimize (see Bleaney and Dimico, 2016), therefore women's contributions to historical dynamics should also be a source of legitimacy and public knowledge.

The legend of Sulasih-Sulandono may be very meaningful and pervasive in the lives of the Pekalongan people. The image of their past life reflected in the figure of Sulasih-Sulandono may be a kind of personification of the ideal relationship between men and women, mutual love and respect, living together in a harmonious relationship. One remaining meaning is how embedded and meaningful the legend of Sulasih-Sulandono's stature is for residents and will probably always be their pride.

4. The Dynamics of *Sintren* amid Ethnic Diversity of Pekalongan Community

It is inevitable to focus on *sintren* in the context of ethnic diversity since the people of Pekalongan live amid such diversity. They are an illustration of the northern coastal communities of Java with intercultural experience (Lombard, 2008). In terms of local traditions, cultural contact between Javanese, Arabs, and Chinese is inescapable. This ethnic diversity is evident in Pekalongan City, where people of different ethnicities can coexist in harmony with mutual respect.

Although there are still many traditions that differentiate the Javanese, Arab, and Chinese ethnicities within the community, these differences do not lead to fragmentation. The Arab descendants, for example, occupy many areas known as Arab Villages, where they maintain their original traditions such as dance and the arrangement of men and women in celebrations. Women of Arab descent must also marry Arab descendants only. During celebrations, women of Arab descent generally celebrate events with Zafin dances, but they are in separate groups for women only.

The structure of the local community is mostly due to labor relations, where the "merchant/businessman" group is more respected than employees. As merchants or entrepreneurs, they are typically creative and independent people with a strong work ethic. In line with the explanation of the cultural practitioner Ibnu Novel (in Marwah, 2021), another group of people who are highly respected is the *kyai*, especially the Habaib or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, the Great Prophet of Islam. A group of Habibs is usually referred to as Habaib (many Habibs). In the context of the Arab descendant community, the Arabs in Pekalongan consist of two groups of descendants, namely Habib (male) and Habibah/Syarifah (to refer to women), as well as non-Habib and Syarifah Arab descendants.

Regarding the ethnic diversity and local structure of Pekalongan society, there is no single perspective on the view of *sintren*. For the Arab community, the view of *sintren* is divided. As explained by an Arab descendant of Habaib (Marwah et al., 2022), the view of local culture for Arab communities is divided according to their lineage. According to his explanation, those groups of Arab descendants whose direct line is from the Prophet (Habib-Habibah) have a more accepting view of local culture and traditions, including *sintren*. Besides *sintren*, there are many other local traditions, such as *Nyadran* or sea offering and the tradition of calculating good days to go to sea or build ships. This means that various local cultures and traditions can coexist with the perspective of the Arab descendants of Habaib. In general, Habib Luthfi, a national figure from Pekalongan, is a symbol of religious and multicultural harmony in the country and is accepted by all layers of society.

On the other hand, some people in Pekalongan City have various views on *sintren*. *Sintren* is played by women with all the attributes, dance rules, and costumes. It can demean women and be associated with mysticism (Marwah et al., 2021). A tradition born from the people themselves has received contempt from certain groups of society. Those who disagree tend to take issue with the mysticism in *sintren* dance. Even in the Pekalongan City area, *sintren* has become extinct. In 2015, there was still one *sintren* group left, but after that, there were no more *sintren* dance activities in the Pekalongan City community. Perhaps *sintren* is more meaningful and valuable to the people of Pekalongan Regency, who are more semi-

rural than the people of Pekalongan City, who are more typically urban. The perception of *sintren* as a traditional dance of the Pekalongan people seems to be limited by the administrative region.

In other communities, such as Pekalongan Regency, the existence of *sintren* dance is precious as a legacy of past ancestors to be preserved. Apart from being a cultural heritage, traditional art is also a means of social expression for the local community. Lucas' study (2019) states that coastal communities have a habit of expressing social protests openly through traditional arts and song verses. In addition to *sintren*, Pekalongan people also have the art of *wayang golek* in their performances. *Wayang golek* can also be a medium for the community to convey social criticism. However, this study has not found information on the effectiveness of delivering social criticism through *sintren* dance.

In a study conducted by Gilman (2013), it was found that social criticism from women artists can have a strong impact on political participation, gender balance issues, and power relations in local communities. Although this study did not identify *sintren* as a means of social protest, it proved that *sintren* was once a means of spreading Islam, particularly during the growth and development of Islam in the region. Cultural figure Ribut Achmadi (in Marwah, et.al 2021) emphasized that the poetry of *sintren* songs describes "the union between humans and their creator," and therefore, *sintren* became a medium for proselytizing for the spread of Islam.

Perhaps, for some people, dance is still considered merely as body movements that are disconnected from the socio-cultural context that surrounds it. However, what was conveyed by the cultural figure, in addition to representing the local community's expression of pride in the *sintren* dance, also seems to be in line with what Barbara Ridley (2009) stated. Ridley argued that a lot of power is articulated through body movements and dance, which describe the surrounding local structure. In the context of *sintren* dance, the encompassing local structure is when the community began to experience social change at the time Islam started to grow and develop. During this period, *sintren* dance became a medium for spreading religious values and teachings through the verses of songs accompanying the dance.

The connection between *sintren* and the development of Islam can be understood from Bernard HM Vlekke's (2019) study. Vlekke stated that the introduction of Islam in coastal areas did not show a clear break from the past in Java. *Wayang* and the stories of the Mahabharata and Ramayana continued to resonate and be enjoyed by both nobles and commoners. Javanese royal culture remained Javanese Hinduism. In this context, *sintren* also developed and became a medium for spreading religion. Islam, as a religion that was later accepted by local communities, still provided space for the growth of local arts and culture. In this regard, Vreede-De Steers (2008) stated the importance of understanding the changes that occur in society due to the adoption of Islamic values and the syntheses formed between locality and Islam and the problems that arise.

The way *sintren* plays a role in the spread of Islam is interesting, considering that *sintren* is almost synonymous with the contribution of women. The main focus of *sintren* is the female dancer. Therefore, it appears that Islam not only provides space for the development of local arts and culture but also for women dancers to continue to contribute. It is important to recognize women's efforts in the development of religion and society and to acknowledge their contributions to history. Women help maintain their religion and preserve their customs. It is crucial to note that women have an essential contribution in their way in the dynamics of society. Women's efforts in developing *sintren* and the verses of propagation of the spread of Islam should be widely known.

Instead of Islam brought by Arab traders, the Pekalongan society also coexists with the Chinese. Along with ethnic diversity, the Chinese communities also have local traditions that are still alive today, such as the lion dance or *duk duk jeng*, *pohtehi*, and so on (Haryono, 2008). *Barongsai* or *duk duk jeng* is a traditional Chinese dance in which the dancers use a lion-like costume. The *pohtehi* puppet is cloth-made. The puppeteer will insert his hand into the cloth and play it like a puppet in general. Pekalongan still also has a residential area called Chinatown. It is said that the Dutch government used to divide and organize the Arab, Chinese, and native villages to facilitate supervision by the colonials. Until now, the Chinatown area in Pekalongan still exists. The area consists of churches, the ancient temple of Pho An Thian, and houses with gable roofs (*ngang shan*) with upward curved ends, and shows a fusion with Dutch architects.

In the context of local community development, although the origins of *sintren* are linked to Pekalongan's aristocratic figures of the past, the development of *sintren* is far from the palace area. *Sintren* grew in the common people on the north

coast. Despite its location in the coastal region, not all communities are typical fishing communities. In fact, for Pekalongan, the main structure is merchants. In this case, Lombard (2008) sees that coastal women have played a dominant role since commerce and trade began. Women showed significant contributions in the markets right down to the money exchange kiosks. It is therefore not surprising that women have played an important role in traditional dance. Of course, being a dancer is not just a matter of dancing and moving your body, but demonstrating the various local powers that accompany it.

Finally, the *sintren* dance has grown and developed more in Pekalongan Regency compared to Pekalongan City, which has a more commercial face. Pekalongan Regency is located further inland, away from the coast, and its people rely more on farming for their livelihood. In Lombard's (2008) view, in agrarian societies, women are freer in agrarian environments than in coastal commercial cities. For Lombard, it is important to understand the relationship between men and women in terms of basic "cohesiveness," a complementary relationship between the principles of women and men. He emphasized that the division of tasks and power was evenly distributed between the two sexes.

Yet, Lombard also mentions that along with the development of cities in the coastal area and the Islamic religion and its urban society, there was a tendency to limit women's freedom and movement. Among the *priyayi* (aristocrats), there is always a saying about "*wong wadon iku suargane nunut nerakane katut*," which means that a woman must follow (her husband), either to heaven or hell. This seems inversely proportional to the participation of *sintren* dancers in spreading Islam through the verses of *sintren* songs as mentioned above. Perhaps the *priyayi* (aristocratic) life presents different power relations between women and men compared to the power relations between women and men in the context of the equality of ordinary society.

5. Concluding Remarks

The author emphasizes that traditional dance can vividly depict the structure of local communities, encapsulating social, cultural, political, religious, and other pertinent issues. The contestation of local power often overshadows traditional dance, and the same conditions apply to *sintren* dance, which has spread widely on the north coast of Java. Thus, the researcher's hypothesis is correct, stating that the existence and dynamics of *sintren* dance cannot be separated from the contestation of the local power that surrounds it. This has been ongoing since the traditional dance was born, and the research shows this. While this paper cannot cover all comprehensive issues about *sintren*, the findings of the data and information obtained illustrate this.

The first manifestation of local power is depicted in the contribution of women to the birth and development of *sintren*. The historical narrative and the transmission of knowledge seem to favor women. The emergence of *sintren*, inseparable from the aristocratic figurehead of the north coast of Java. However, the local community always remembers *sintren* as a dance involving the participation of women, which cannot be replaced by the other gender. The center point of *sintren* dance is the woman. Moreover, *sintren* contains valuable local values related to aesthetics, religious and respect values, believed by the local people to be present in the dance.

The subsequent local power is associated with the introduction and development of Islam. When Islam began to grow in the region, *sintren*, and the women as dancers, played a role in preaching the religion, and Islam seemed to make room for local traditions. However, there is also a presumption of mysticism towards *sintren* related to the legend of the female figure Dewi Rantamsari, whose name is still alive today. Amidst ethnic diversity where *sintren* grows and develops, perspectives on *sintren* are divided. This is, to some extent, linked to the diverse ethnicities residing there, including indigenous people, Arabs, and Chinese.

Sintren dance is related to many dimensions of local society, and women have contributed to it in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Therefore, it is time to see women *Sintren* dancers more honestly by placing them as public knowledge. Women *Sintren* dancers will not only be remembered as entertaining dancers but more as preservers of cultural arts, participating in preaching, and still living amid the dynamics of a society with diverse ethnicities. While the state's concerns to acknowledge *Sintren* as an intangible cultural heritage are important, placing it as a common property is still more valuable.

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