

Research Article

Modern Relevance of the Mass Ruwatan Ritual in Kadilangu, Demak

Khoirul Anwar* and Ufi Saraswati

Semarang State University, Indonesia

ORCIDKhoirul Anwar: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4428-4337>**Abstract.**

This study examines the Mass Ruwatan ritual held at the Notobratan Hall in Kadilangu, Demak Regency, focusing on its administration and its relevance to contemporary social conditions. A moderating approach is used, combining historical analysis with observations of present-day practices, incorporating both written and oral traditions. The research uses a qualitative method with an ethno-videographic approach, documenting the ritual from the beginning to the end of the activity to produce a documentary that can be distributed digitally. Traditions in the archipelago that have survived across the ages are evidence of cultural preservation efforts carried out across generations. While cultural practices evolve over time, these changes do not erase traditions but instead adapt them to contemporary contexts. The study highlights that maintaining past traditions through adjustments and modernization efforts is a crucial strategy for preserving cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: mass ruwatan, current social situation, cultural conservation

Corresponding Author: Khoirul Anwar; email: irulanwar@mail.unnes.ac.id

Published 16 May 2025

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

© Anwar, Saraswati. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICORSIA 2024 Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Ruwatan is a tradition in the archipelago which is held in various regions with each characteristic. Even though they both have the same name as *ruwatan*, technically each region has a different management system but has the same essence, namely to unravel the “complexities” of life experienced by the community, both as a group and individually. *Ruwatan* is a human effort both curatively and preventively in relation to people’s living conditions. Judging from the aspect of implementation in terms of size/amount, the ritual procession is carried out both individually and in large groups/mass. There are several considerations for the ritual to be carried out individually/ in groups, including the facilities and infrastructure that must be met in terms of the ability of the person/group to carry out the *ruwatan*.

Ruwatan is understood as a typical Javanese ceremony aimed at protecting children against supernatural threats symbolized by *Bhatara Kala*, known as the God of



Destruction (1). The assumption that there is a supernatural danger or sin is deeply ingrained in the beliefs of the Javanese people. Children or adults who bear the burden of sin (*nandhang sukerta*) need to be cleansed so that they are free from all threats of harm, illness and unnatural death. *Bhatara Kala* is a representation of an antagonist character who is believed to have a desire to eat human children who are classified as *sukerta*. Humans who are classified as *sukerta* need to be treated. Based on the *murwakala* twisting convention, there are 60 types according to *Centhini* manuscript, while in *Murwakala* manuscript there are 147 types, and in the *Pustaka Raja Purwa* there are 136 types (2)

The tradition of mass *ruwatan* at *Pendopo Notobratan* Demak is a social reality that cannot be separated from the context of space and time. Spatially, the ritual was carried out in Demak Regency with participants not only from within the city, there were even participants from abroad. Mass *ruwatan* at the Demak *Notobratan* Hall has distinctive characteristics that are different from other regions. This is influenced by the condition of the Demak region as a coastal area which is close to the coast area. The existence of the Java Sea in the northern part of Demak Regency is used as one of the *ruwatan* locations, namely for the *larungan* procession of *sukerta* objects. In the context of time, *ruwatan* is a ritual that relates to the past, present and future from the perspective of the performers. In this study, a moderating approach is used which seeks to record current events with a historical review by utilizing both written and oral traditions in today's global digital era. This research will use an ethnographic approach as a perspective and work method that will be carried out from the beginning to the end of the activity with the output of a documentary film that can be distributed digitally.

2. Research Methodology

This research is a field research carried out through an inductive thinking process with a qualitative approach (3). The qualitative approach was chosen by the researcher because it is appropriate to get an in-depth picture of the research topic. The data in this study is in the form of information or facts obtained through observation or research in the field which can be analyzed in order to understand a phenomenon or to support a theory (4). As for qualitative research, the data is presented in the form of a description. As for what is collected in this study is data that is in accordance with the focus of research. Collecting data in this study by means of purposive sampling, that is, the sample chosen depends on the research objective without regard to generalization

abilities (Patton, 1990). The data sources in this study can be divided into two, namely humans and non-humans. Human data sources function as subjects or key informants and data obtained through informants is in the form of soft data. Non-human data sources are documents that are relevant to the research focus, such as events or activities related to the research focus. Data collection in this study used three techniques, namely (1) in-depth interviews; 2) participant observation; and (3) documentation study (5). Checking the validity of the data is a very important and inseparable part of qualitative research. The implementation of checking the validity of the data is based on four criteria, namely the degree of trust, transferability, dependability, and certainty. Data analysis in this study includes: 1) data reduction, namely classifying, directing, removing unnecessary and organizing data; 2) presentation of data, namely finding patterns of meaningful relationships and providing the possibility of drawing conclusions; and 3) conclusion/verification (6).

3. Research Result and Discussion

The mass treatment at the *Notobraton* Kadilangu Demak Hall was organized by the *Sunan Kalijaga* Heir Family Association for generations. Organizing *ruwatan* involves a large committee that plays a role starting from the event to the equipment. The tradition of mass rituals at the *Notobraton* Hall is held twice (two waves) in one year, more precisely in the months of *Muharram (suro)* and *Rajab (rejeb)*. *Ruwatan* participants, hereinafter referred to as *sukerta*, come from various regions which in recent years have monitored approximately 500 participants in each batch.

Based on interviews, observations and documentation, the ritual begins with the participants wearing white chromatic clothes tied with *Lawe* thread. According to the key informants in this study, *ikrom* clothing is a unique attribute that is only worn in mass treatment at the *Notobraton* Hall Kadilangu Demak. After that, the participants took a short distance from the courtyard to the porch of the pavilion to be handed over to *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana*. *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana* has a very important role in the whole series of mass *ruwatan* rituals. From the beginning to the end of the procession, *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana* holds every ritual that must be followed by all participants/*sukerta*.

The position of *sukerta* who has entered and sat in the pavilion marks the start of the core activities of mass rituals. *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana* performed a *sliweran* procession, namely spreading *lawe* threads in a circle around the *sukerta* crowd. The

sukerta who are surrounded by *lawe* threads mean that they are under the protection and supervision of *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana*. The procession continued with the performance of *wayang kulit* with the play *Murwakala* which narrated the role of *Bhatara Wisnu* in suppressing the desire of *Bhatara Kala* who wanted prey in the form of humans. When he descended from heaven (space), *Bhatara Wisnu* changed his form and changed his name to *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana* who was later able to stop *Bhatara Kala's* desire to eat *sukerta*.

After participating in the puppet show until it's finished, *sukerta* is invited to do *sungkeman*, namely begging for forgiveness and asking for prayers and the blessing of both parents for those who still have and are present in mass rituals. The next procession is followed by splashing, namely *sukerta* being bathed by the *ruwatan* priest using holy water accompanied by various fragrances in the form of flowers. *Siraman* means the hope for the *sukertas* to return to purity and cleanliness both physically and mentally as an important capital to "meet good luck". After that, a procession of cutting some of the nails, hair and *lawe* threads that bind the participants' clothes is carried out. The procession was continued by flying the *peksi/dove* and decomposing the woven coconut leaves before the *sukerta* was handed over to their respective families by *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana*. The entire series of mass rituals was closed with a *larungan* procession, which involved throwing the goods of the *sukertas* in the form of clothes, fingernail clippings, hair and *lawe* threads into the ocean.

Javanese people in certain circles still carry out the *ruwatan* tradition to this day. So far, there has been no clear explanation regarding the position of *ruwatan* in the sense of whether the tradition belongs to one particular religious actualization or just a local belief that arose before the presence of the influence of religions in Java. Ideologically, the existence of the *ruwatan* tradition has not been found in the dogma of one of the religions in the archipelago, as well as the continuity of the *ruwatan* tradition is very paradoxical with the tendency of people's lives to become increasingly hedonic in the modern era. In the spiritual world, *ruwatan* is understood as a way to eliminate the bad consequences that can befall humans (7).

Based on the beliefs of the Javanese people, *ruwatan* is believed to be a ritual to liberate human destiny from the abyss of misery. This provision was originally positioned as mores, namely someone who violated the rules was considered to be able to bring terrible bad luck. The *ruwatan* ritual is complemented by traditional art performances of *wayang kulit*. The play or title of the performance must be specific and no other wayang

plays are allowed, namely the *Murwakala* play or also called *Kala Takon Ayah/Kala Asks his Father* (2).

Ruwatan has been passed down from generation to generation for centuries so that it has become a cultural construction related to the beliefs of the Javanese people. *Ruwatan* in Javanese culture in this modern era has actually been marginalized from the dogma of every religion and the situation of society. In relation to this phenomenon, it is necessary to deconstruct understanding to avoid clashes between local culture and religious dogma. The characteristics of religious clashes are marked by the many cases that have the potential to generate negative impacts, phenomena of distortion, degradation, demoralization to various types of cultural harassment (8).

Ruwatan in some opinions is considered irrelevant to the lives of people who live in the modernization era like now (7). This is because the modern era has the following characteristics:

- a. Humans are not only worshipers of gods and ancestral spirits, but also of manufactured objects. Objects produced by the manufacturing industry are treated as totems. The consumer society is no different from the community of totem owners.
- b. Humans are trapped in a culture of imagery, looks or *facialism*, their culture of taste is: you are stylish, then you exist!
- c. Appearance has an impact on humans not wanting to be themselves, but always wanting to be someone else, namely what they see from other figures circulating through various media (9).

The *Ruwatan* tradition by Javanese people can be followed by participants who come from various different religious backgrounds. In a cultural perspective, this is a phenomenon of multiculturalism as a socio-intellectual movement that has principles on diversity, difference, equality, respect in democracy, human rights, harmony, peace, egalitarianism, tolerance, mutual respect, solidarity and without conflict or violence, with does not eliminate the complexity of differences that exist in a social order (10). *Ruwatan* carried out by Javanese people is in line with the principle of multiculturalism. As a local tradition, *ruwatan* has a basic belief in the form of a local genius which is very different from belief in religious dogma. Even so, the processions in the *ruwatan* ritual are considered not to deviate from religious teachings that are already believed in society (11).

4. Conclusion

The *ruwatan* tradition at the *Notobraton* Hall of Kadilangu Demak begins with the participants wearing a white cloth that covers their entire body (*ikrom* cloth). Participants walked towards the pavilion to be received by *Ki Dalang Kandhabuwana* as the *ruwatan* guide from the beginning to the end of the procession. After the participants entered the pavilion, they watched a puppet show with the title *Murwakala* until it was finished. *Sukerta* then succumbed to both parents to apologize and ask for blessings. They are then bathed in holy water by the caretaker. After being bathed, some of the hair, nails, and *lawe* threads are cut off by *sukerta*, and then all these objects are thrown into the sea. *Ruwatan* is a routine ritual at *Pendopo Notobraton* Kadilangu Demak which is still ongoing in modern times. The condition of a society with various possibilities of life seeks all ways of salvation through tradition/culture. This is an action which, from a cultural perspective, is a rich tradition in Indonesia that needs to be preserved at any time.

References

- [1] Koentjaraningrat. Ritus Peralihan di Indonesia. Jakarta: Bali Pustaka; 1985.
- [2] Sarwanto. Pertunjukan Wayang Kulit Purwa dalam Ritual Bersih Desa Kajian Fungsi dan Makna. Surakarta: ISI Press; 2008.
- [3] Arikunto S. Prosedur Penelitian: Suatu Pendekatan Praktek. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta; 2006.
- [4] Sekaran U. Research Methods for Business. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc; 2007.
- [5] Biklen RC, Qualitative SK. Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods. Boston: Allyn and Bacon; 2008.
- [6] Huberman MBM and MA. Qualitative Data Analysis. 2nd ed. California: Sage Publications; 2005.
- [7] Relin DE. Aktualisasi Ruwatan pada Masyarakat Jawa (Kajian Filosofis). Denpasar: Ashram Gandhi Puri, Indra Udayana Institute of Vedanta; 2015.
- [8] Geriya IW. Tranformasi Kebudayaan Bali Memasuki bad XXI. Denpasar: Dinas Kebudayaan Provinsi Bali; 2000.
- [9] Atmadja NB. Kearifan Lokal dan Agama Pasar. Singaraja IN, editor. Singaraja; 2004.
- [10] Mariyah E. Wacana Bagus dalam PIP Kebudayaan dan Kajian Budaya (Rintisan Pemikiran Posmodernisme yang Ironis). Denpasar: Universitas Udayana; 2004.

[11] Ardika IW. Membangun Budaya Rohani pada Suatu Peradaban. Denpasar; 2006.