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Oral Tradition In Postmodern Age:  
A Study On The Existence Of *Sansana Bandar* Oral Tradition In  
Today's Life Of The Dayak Ngaju Communities In Central Kalimantan

Titik Wijanarti, Bani Sudardi, Mahendra Wijaya, Sri Kusumo Habsari

Program in Cultural Studies, Sebelas Maret University, Jl. Ir. Sutami 36A, Surakarta 57126,  
Indonesia

*titikwijanarti@student.uns.ac.id*

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**Abstract**

*Sansana Bandar* is a type of oral tradition of the Dayak Ngaju Central Kalimantan that can still be found today. As the name implies, *sansana Bandar* is a story about the life of a character named Bandar. Bandar is a man who is said to have good looks and intelligence beyond ordinary people. *Sansana Bandar* in the life of the Dayak Ngaju community does not only have an entertainment function like oral traditions in general. It also has a ritual function, namely as a medium for praying dreams. Various kinds of wishes and aspirations of the Dayak Ngaju community can be conveyed through the *sansana Bandar* event. *Sansana Bandar* is usually performed at night, spoken in the Dayak Ngaju language by a speaker called *panyansana*, without musical instrument accompaniment, and equipped with offering equipment. Today's *Sansana Bandar* is only maintained by a small part of the community. The lack of socialization of *Bandar sansana* in today's life and the insistence on global culture are two things that have caused the weak defense of *Bandar sansana*.

**Keywords:** *Dayak Ngaju*, oral tradition, *sansana Bandar*, existence

**INTRODUCTION**

Globalization is often seen as a threat to local cultures in Indonesia, especially those that develop orally and traditionally since globalization will lead to cultural universality indicated by the ignorance of local cultures heterogeneity (Surahman, 2013; Setyaningrum, 2018). Piliang (2005: 13) states that a stronger attraction of homogenization will drag local culture along the flow of globalization. This becomes a danger for the local culture since it can lead to the loss of existence and identity. On the other hand, if local culture is not developed to maintain its excellence, external interested parties will take the advantage of the condition and exploit the culture, such as by stealing and modifying the culture following the

global economic interests. Several studies on oral traditions in Indonesia show the need for particular strategies or formulas to encourage oral traditions to survive in the current globalization era. The research by Sinaga (2013) confirmed the need to revitalize and invent local traditions in the life of society in Lampung. The study by Primadesi (2013) also highlighted the need for strategies to preserve *Randai* oral tradition in Minangkabau. Moreover, Banda (2017) identified the need for particular strategies to maintain *Sa Ngaza* oral poetry in the life of the Ngadha ethnic communities in Flores.

One of the oral traditions that also encounter challenges in the current globalization era is *Sansana Bandar* that is developing in the life of the Dayak Ngaju communities in Central Kalimantan. This oral tradition takes the form of a story told by a speaker, known as *pangasana* in the Dayak Ngaju language. The story narrates the life of a character, named Bandar, who is portrayed in the text as a modern figure. Some people believe that Bandar was a great figure in the past and the values of his life must be perceived until today despite the changing times. For the Dayak Ngaju communities, *Sansana Bandar* functions as an entertainment and a ritual, a medium for voicing their dreams to the creator. Those who hold the *Sansana Bandar* event believe that Bandar's spirit will come to help realize the goals they raise.

The Dayak Ngaju community today is a society that has also experienced a lot of socio-cultural dynamics due to globalization. In the context of global community life, *Sansana Bandar* can be seen as part of local culture which has the opportunity to regain its strength following the end of modernism. Hudayana (2000) argues that compared to the New Order which reproduced modernism, the era of globalization provided more opportunities for the strengthening of local cultural movements. Globalization does open up universal cultural homogenization but also opens up cultural pluralism because it can be a means for the spread of capitalism throughout the world. The cultural market views that culture is not only the result of industrial formation in the centers of civilization. It is also produced in various parts of the world which are assembled in the global market. Meanwhile, the flow of reform and the spirit of regionalism also opens up opportunities for the emergence of local culture as a force that can strengthen the identity of local communities with all their demands when dealing with outsiders.

The Dayak Ngaju communities today have also experienced a lot of socio-cultural dynamics due to globalization. In the context of global community life, *Sansana Bandar* can be viewed as part of local culture, which has the opportunity to regain its strength following the end of modernism. Hudayana (2000) argued that compared to the New Order, which reproduced modernism, the era of globalization provides more opportunities for the strengthening of local cultural movements. Globalization opens up universal cultural homogenization as well as cultural pluralism because it can be a means for spreading capitalism throughout the world. The cultural market views that culture is not merely formed by industry in the centers of civilization. It is also produced in various parts of the world, which are brought together in the global market. Meanwhile, the flow of reform and the spirit

of regionalism also give the opportunities for the rise of local culture that can strengthen the identity of local communities with all the consequences when dealing with outsiders.

This research article aims to describe the existence of *Sansana Bandar* oral tradition in the life of the Dayak Ngaju communities today. Two subject matters are raised and described in this article. Who still maintains the existence of *Sansana Bandar* and how is the position of *Sansana Bandar* in the life of local people today?

## **METHOD**

There are three sources of data in this research, namely: (1) the *sansana Bandar* event which then produces a transcription of the show; (2) the informant who then produces the text of the interview results, and (3) documents in the form of various written sources related to the object and the methods and theories used. This research is within the framework of cultural studies, one of which has multidisciplinary characteristics. Based on these multidisciplinary characteristics, several methods and theories can be used together, eclectically according to the research objectives. Qualitative methods with hermeneutics were used in this study to interpret the text of the interview results.

The data analysis process in this study also applies several theories to achieve the research objectives. Semiotic analysis is used in this study to analyze the signs found in the *sansana Bandar* story text. Functional analysis is used to describe the functions of the *Bandar sansana* in the life of the Dayak Ngaju people. Postcolonial analysis is used to describe the background and historical review of the community in defending the *Bandar sansana* oral tradition in the present. Sociological analysis is used to describe the position of the *Bandar sansana* in the life of the Dayak Ngaju people today.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion in this article begins with an explanation of the development of arts, traditions and culture in the life of people in Indonesia. This is significant because *Sansana Bandar*, which is the subject of this study, is a part of the area. The presence of this tradition today is certainly influenced by various points of view of global communities towards arts, tradition, and culture because the three aspects are dynamic and in line with the development and changes of society. Oral tradition as a part of culture and tradition surely experience this dynamism. The followings are the descriptions of the existence of arts, tradition, and culture in the life of global communities and the preservation of *Sansana Bandar* in the life of the Dayak Ngaju communities today.

### **The Preservation of Local Tradition in the Life of Global Communities in Indonesia**

Ahimsa-Putra (2015: 3) borrowed the division of traditions proposed by Robert Redfield, an American anthropologist who divides tradition into two groups, great tradition (*ageng* tradition) and little tradition (*alit* tradition). The *ageng* tradition is a tradition that develops among the elite group of people and commonly is derived from the royal culture. Meanwhile, the *alit* tradition consists of the customs and traditions that develop among ordinary people. Not all communities or ethnic groups in Indonesia recognize the arts that belong to either *ageng* tradition or *alit* tradition due to their limitation in the understanding of the royal system in their social life. People who do not recognize the royal system are known as a tribal society and the tradition they produce is called tribal tradition.

Based on the division of traditions by Robert Redfield, the Dayak Ngaju communities are classified into tribal societies because the influence of the royal system is not found in their social life. Even though the legend of *Nyai Undang* that developed among the people in Kapuas mentioned Suku Tanjung Pematang Sawang, the existence of this kingdom has not been empirically proven. Hence, the oral tradition of *Sansana Bandar* that was born and developed among Dayak Ngaju communities can be considered as a part of a tribal tradition as proposed by Robert Redfield.

The arts originated from both *ageng* and *alit* traditions have grown into performing arts or arts that are performed to be enjoyed and admired for the beauty. However, many forms of *ageng* tradition are challenged by socio-political changes marked by the decline in the function of the kingdom after the independence period. Compared to the arts of *alit* tradition and tribal arts, *ageng* tradition is more preserved because of its greatness. The government will also take part in preserving the arts originating from the *ageng* tradition since it is a cultural product with high value. Meanwhile, the arts originating from *alit* tradition is maintained by the local communities without interference and supports from the government. In contrast, the arts originating from tribal tradition is generally a part of religious rituals or ceremonies (Ahimsa, 2015). The traditional arts can be enjoyed by spectators but that is not its main purpose. Moreover, arts is aimed to entertain people who watch it. Therefore, the oral tradition born from the tribal culture does not belong to art.

Ahimsa's description shows a shift in the existence of *ageng* and *alit* traditions at present. The shift is proven by the change in the function of both traditions into performing arts. The two traditions only differ in the subjects that maintain them. The arts of *ageng* tradition is maintained by the government, while the arts of *alit* tradition is preserved by the communities. Meanwhile, the art of tribal tradition does not depend on the government nor the communities because it is a part of religious rituals that rely on the existence of particular religious groups and their ability to institutionalize themselves in various new religions that are now held by the people.

Koentjaraningrat (1994; Andri, 2016) argued that in the pre-independence era, traditional communities functioned as traditional activities as rituals. For example, Javanese farmers believed that they could influence plant fertility through ceremonies that symbolized fertility. However, in the subsequent development of

social life, traditional arts that previously had ritual function has changed into performing arts, as happened to *Jathitan* in Yogyakarta, (Kuswarsantyo, 2014). Today, *Jathilan* does no longer serve as a ritual.

Further, Sudarsono (2003) theorized that the development of tourism has given birth to a new form or packaging of art with the following characteristics: (1) imitating the original; (2) short or compact; (3) full of variety; (4) ignoring sacred values, and (5) cheap. He also sees a shift in tradition, which was originally part of rituals and has now become a part of economic activities. The *ruwahan* tradition among Klaten people, for example, was previously a ritual presented for the ancestors. Along with the changing times and shifts in the patterns of social life in the communities, today's *ruwahan* becomes a part of the economic activities of the community (Pertiwi, 2018). This shift in function can occur due to collective agreements in the community that can unintentionally and naturally shape new agreements.

The explanation above clarify that the categorization of traditional arts into *ageng*, *alit*, and *tribal* traditions is not fully applicable in today's society. Various changes in people's living systems due to globalization have eroded and shed the strictness of the boundaries among *ageng*, *alit*, and *tribal* in a process of maintaining traditions in the present. The different situations that have been described indirectly question the classic statement about the function of literature or art as put forward by Horace, which is *dulce et utile* (entertaining and useful) (Teeuw, 1998).

In the postmodern era, "entertaining and useful" alone is not enough. It requires a variety of assets to face the challenges of inheritance. Jean Baudrillard postulated that postmodern culture is a culture of use-value, exchange value, and money culture. Money does not fully function as a medium of exchange to meet the needs but becomes problematic, psychologic (human nature), or a culturalistic (becomes a function of society) (Banda, 2017). The shift of traditional art function, from ritual into tourist attraction depicts this as a part of postmodern culture as mentioned by Baudrillard.

The description portrays that the breaking down of the boundaries among *ageng*, *alit*, and *tribal* in society's today's life is the consequence of cultural changes due to globalization. The condition then contributes to the emergence of the concept of "culture" as suggested by Williams that culture is ordinary and covers the notion of both the elite and the common people (1975). Williams' point of view emerged as part of the culturalism phase in the cultural studies movement in the UK, which sought to refuse the division of culture into two groups, namely elite culture and mass culture (Rokhman, 2008). The movement then became the root of cultural studies in Indonesia.

The concept of "culture" in studies centering on cultural preservation in people's life today can no longer be oriented to the notion of "culture" which has been perceived as a system of ideas of society passed down across generations. Furthermore, Williams suggested that "culture" is a practice. The research on cultural studies must be carried out by examining the conditions that trigger production and reproduction, instead of by investigating formalistic model in

analyzing texts. Williams introduced cultural analysis as an active transformation process (Rokhman, 2008: 21). His opinion is obvious in several studies on the preservation of oral traditions in Indonesia, which are not only influenced by the communities but also by other functions of dialectics and have a major effect on the existence of a tradition today.

Shahab (2004) pronounced the studies on some oral traditions in Indonesia, such as *Barongsai* (lion dance) in Jakarta, *Mamanda* and *Damarwulan* arts in South Kalimantan, as well as *Rudat* and *Gendang Balek* arts in Lombok. Those studies concluded that the existence of an art group, including an oral tradition group, is strongly influenced and determined by the dialectical processes among three aspects, namely the arts, the existence of the ethnic group, and political authority. Some of the studies depicted a strong relationship between political function and the existence of an art group in society. Revitalization of art groups that are nearly vanished, for example, highly depends on the political policies of the current authority. The dialectic among those aspects can either take place naturally or be created (revitalized in a new form). The revitalization of *Barongsai* in the Betawi communities, for example, was initially intended to revive an art group that had almost disappeared and support tourism. Unexpectedly, this process led to an ethnic revitalization, which accelerated the political practices of the art groups.

Some studies also revealed the strengthening of local culture amid globalization. The Hawaiians, for instance, restored their native culture as a tourism object after centuries of being confined in Western culture. Likewise, the Ainu tried to revive their local culture after being under Japanese domination for a long time (Friedman, 1994). Similar cases are also found in Lampung, where the societies revived their local traditions from the domination of immigrant culture, Sinaga, 2014). The differences among the cases in Hawaii, Ainu, and Lampung lie in the purposes of the revitalization efforts. The revitalization of local tradition in Hawaii and Ainu were aimed at encouraging tourism, while the practice in Lampung was directed to change the stigma that had been attached to their cultural identity.

This depiction shows the awareness of several communities to re-strengthen local traditions for different reasons and purposes, one of which is tourism. This interest then encourages cultural commodification. Wood (1993) mentioned that tradition is constantly changing. Handler and Linnekin described the shift of traditional conception, from naturalistic to symbolistic. The naturalistic concept assumes that tradition is an objective entity, a core characteristic of an inherited cultural nature whose continuity and limitations are analogous to a natural object. Tradition is always symbolically built today, instead of passed down from the past (Maunati, 2006).

Meanwhile, the oral tradition of *Sansana Bandar* in the life of the Dayak Ngaju communities today does not experience a shift as suggested by Wood, Sudarsono, or Baudrillard. The tradition does not become a part of economic commodities like the other forms of traditions, such as *ruwahan* and *jathilan* rituals. In today's society, *Sansana Bandar* remains to occupy a position as a part of rituals even though new functions are given to it. *Sansana Bandar* is an oral tradition that has a

ritual function for the communities to communicate their dreams to God. Its existence among the Dayak Ngaju communities is more determined by its function. Its function as a ritual has faded along with the decrease of public interest in *Sansana Bandar*.

### **Performers of *Sansana Bandar* and Problematic Challenges of Inheritance**

The discussion on the performers of *Sansana Bandar* focuses on *panyansana* since the tradition is performed orally by a speaker, instead of by a group of people like any other theatrical performances. Koster (2008; Attas, 2019) suggested that the creation processes of oral tradition based on poetic model approach include four aspects, which are the creator, text, audience, and real world. An oral tradition is formed when social interaction happens between a speaker with other speakers using the object of oral variety passed down from one generation to the next generation. The concept of text in the oral tradition is not limited to the concept of the narrated story but includes other elements such as musical accompaniment. The story that is retold will have its version and change based on the nature of the audience because the audience is indeed not passive. The main duty of *panyansana* is remembering. *Panyasana* considers the story being told happened in the past, instead of fictional.

Based on the four aspects, it is obvious that *pangasana* is the creator of the oral text. The main concept of oral tradition creation is remembering, the process of creating texts through actions, which are repeated, adjusted, applied, and reaffirmed. The *pangasana* in *Sansana Bandar* also plays a role as a text creator, who works on what he or she remembers about the character of Bandar and retell it to the audience. Therefore, the position of *panyansana* is vital to ensure the sustainability of *Sansana Bandar* as an oral tradition.

To be a *panyansana*, an individual is not required to have particular abilities. He or she only needs to apprehend the story of Bandar and understand the requirements for performing *Sansana Bandar*. The ability to become a *panyansana* is acquired naturally from experience, instead of inherited through special training. This is in contrast to the transfer of skills of a mastermind or *dalang* in Java and a *Gambang Rancag* performer in Betawi which is done through training or internship in art studios (see Rianto, 2015; Attas, 2019). Pudentia (2018) also contended that the natural inheritance of oral tradition is difficult to be applied today; and therefore, a breakthrough from the academic field is necessary.

*Sansana Bandar* is performed based on the request of residents' or particular parties. As stated by Koster at the beginning of this section, the creator deals with the role of social interaction between one speaker and others through oral mode. In other words, the skills of retelling *Sansana Bandar* is inherited from a *panyansana* to the other *panyansana* when the performance is delivered.

Observations that had been carried out noticed that the number of *Sansana Bandar panyasana* continues to decrease along with the decline in public interest in holding the event (interview with Garutak, 2018). Meanwhile, Lord (2000)

emphasizes that the oral tradition speaker's memorization process is not the case. Figuring out a formula through listening habit to oral traditions is more significant. This habit can only be realized by intensifying the performance of *Sansana Bandar*, and this shows the close relationship between the existence of *Sansana Bandar pangasana* and the communities as the agents of preservation.

The above description portrays that the existence of *panyansana* as one of the aspects contributing to the preservation of *Sansana Bandar* at present life is closely related to the community. The existence of *panyansana* is alarming as marked by the decreasing number of this position in both Palangkaraya City and Kapuas Regency. This condition happens due to the decreased interest of the Dayak Ngaju communities in holding *Sansana Bandar* event. The following section discusses the relationship between the existence of *Sansana Bandar* and the life of Dayak Ngaju communities today.

### **Dayak Ngaju Communities and the Preservation of *Sansana Bandar***

The results of field observations and interviews revealed that *Sansana Bandar* is still maintained by some of the Dayak Ngaju communities. Some of them believe in the ritual function of this oral tradition. They are confident that by holding the event, their wishes will come true with the help of Bandar spirit that comes at the event. Mallinowski (1939) mentioned the function of culture in human life. He argued that humans are categorized into some levels based on their psycho-biological needs and culture serves as the instrument to meet those needs. One level of human psycho-biological need is a system of thought and faith, which consists of knowledge, magic religion, and art sports game ceremony. People position *Sansana Bandar* as a tool for fulfilling their psycho-biological needs.

Belief in the ritual function of *Sansana Bandar* keeps existing which among others are stated by Mr. Untung S.Ili from Kapuas Regency. He confirmed that he holds *Sansana Bandar* when he communicates his ideals to God. Recently, he held the event before building a house, after the construction was completed, and when the house was ready to be moved in. The first event was conducted as a request while the second was gratitude to God. These samples prove that the ritual function of *Sansana Bandar* is still practiced in the life of the Dayak Ngaju communities. Other traditions with a similar purpose related to celebration and the other types of ceremonies can also be found in other communities in Indonesia, such as *selamatan* and *mitoni* in Java (see Kholil, 2009; Baihaqi, 2017), and *molonthalo* tradition in Gorontalo (see Rahman, 2012). However, *Selamatan* has been institutionalized in a socio-religious (Islam) forum in Javanese communities, while *Sansana Bandar* ritual has not been institutionalized in Dayak Ngaju communities. This is attributed to different socio-religious situations of the Javanese (Islam) and the Dayak (Kaharingan) people.

Furthermore, it was found that some of the Dayak Ngaju people place *Sansana Bandar* as a local tradition that must be preserved and maintained. An interview with Mr. Sulatin from Kapuas Regency confirmed that preservation of *Sansana*



*Bandar* is necessary because of the values of local wisdom held by Dayak communities. However, the majority of Dayak Ngaju communities have the opposite opinion. This is obvious in the decreased interest of the local people to organize the tradition in today's life. *Sansana Bandar* is commonly practiced today by the elderly to memorize their life in the past.

The previous description also proves that *Sansana Bandar* today is only maintained informally with a limited scope. This is closely linked to the lack of socialization about *Sansana Bandar* practice in the life of Dayak Ngaju communities. As a consequence, this tradition is only recognized by particular groups of communities, such as the elderly, while young people in Dayak Ngaju communities only recognize it as a name of an oral tradition of Dayak Ngaju community since they rarely watch and enjoy the performance.

The lack of socialization *Sansana Bandar* in the communities is also attributed to the change of beliefs of the local people, from *kaharingan* into Christianity and Islam. This religious shift also contributes to the way they perceive *Sansana Bandar*. Those who have embraced a new religion perceive that *Sansana Bandar* is a part of *kaharingan* ritual that must not be perceived. Sidenden (2013) affirmed that the change in the religion of Dayak communities, particularly in Islam, contributes to a tendency to change the orientation of ethnicity. Communities who embrace Islam tend to refer themselves to different ethnic identity as "Malays" or "Banjarnese", instead of "Dayaknese". They abandon Dayak culture because they do not consider themselves as a part of Dayak communities. Besides the lack of socialization, the global cultural flow puts an effect on the low interest of Dayak Ngaju communities in *Sansana Bandar*. The global culture that enters into the life of Dayak communities causes many people, particularly young people, to live with modern culture.

This condition causes *Sansana Bandar* to stagnate or even disappear. A similar condition also happens to *rarangken* tradition in Garut Regency. *Rarangken* was maintained by the elderly because many young people urbanized to big cities for various reasons such as studying and working. Because only elder people made the preservation efforts, this tradition disappears today (see Rohimah, Hufad, and Widowati, 2019).

Media is one of the instruments playing an important role in this global era. However, it is unfortunate that *Sansana Bandar* tradition has never been reported by the media. This condition is in contrast with that of leather puppet or *wayang kulit* in Java. This oral tradition was preserved by media, through which it was broadcasted on TVRI (an Indonesian national TV broadcaster) as reported by Sulistiani (2017: 97-112). *Sansana Bandar* has never received attention from academicians and studies on this tradition have never been conducted. On the other hand, the oral literature of *sekujang* preserved among Serawai communities in Seluma Regency was successfully documented through several studies (see Wibowo, 2017: 40-47). This documentation has a positive effect on the preservation of the oral literature.

The discussion shows that the position of *Sansana Bandar* among the Dayak Ngaju communities today is weakening for various reasons and backgrounds. This tradition is marginalized among the local communities due to the changes in the life patterns of Dayak Ngaju communities as a consequence of globalization. In today's postmodern era, an oral tradition that depicts the greatness of a figure in the past is no longer placed as one of the great narration. *Sansana Bandar* is no longer considered as an identity of Dayak Ngaju communities since the identity of postmodern communities is no longer attributed to the traditional environment.

## CONCLUSION

Sansana Bandar narrative actually contains the ideology of resistance of the Dayak Ngaju people against foreign forces that have reconstructed their identity as a traditional society. In today's life, the sansana Bandar narrative is defended by some people to fight the ideology of globalization by maintaining oral traditions. Why only part of the community, not all Dayak Ngaju people have the same attitude towards sansana Bandar? The answer is that there are changes in the times which have resulted in changes in the mindset of society in viewing oral traditions today.

In the concept of postmodern social life, there has been rejection of what is called a grand narrative as suggested by Lyotard (1984: 81). This then influenced the way the general public views the oral tradition. The greatness of the Bandar character in the sansana Bandar text is no longer seen as a grand narrative that must be perceived and applied in today's life. Today's culture is in the level of meaning as everything that is practiced in everyday life as stated by William that culture is ordinary. Today's Sansana Bandar is not at this level, it is not a part of the people's daily practice.

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