



Body, River, and Spirituality: Cultural Ecology Practices in the Process of Creating Art for the River Festival "Resik Kali "

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Abstract: *The Resik Kali River Festival in Sukoharjo Village, Pacitan, is a cultural ecological practice that articulates the relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality through a series of rituals and art performances. This paper discusses the process of creating works in the Resik Kali Festival using an approach based on the methods of artistic creation, which include the stages of exploration, formulation of ideas, design of works, and artistic realization. Based on cultural ecology studies, the resik kali ritual is understood as a cultural strategy for caring for the ecological landscape and the identity of agrarian communities. Through dramaturgical analysis and the concept of the body as a medium of perception, this paper shows that this festival presents a participatory, dialogical, and ecological aesthetic experience. This study provides a conceptual contribution to art creation based on local wisdom, while also being relevant to the development of ecology-based artistic practices.*

Keywords: river festival, river cleaning, body, spirituality

1. INTRODUCTION

Rivers in rural culture serve ecological, social, and cultural functions. Rivers not only provide water and support biodiversity, but also serve as spaces for social interaction, symbols of local identity, and supports for community cultural practices. Cultural ecology studies in Indonesia show that rivers shape the cultural landscape and patterns of human-environment relations (Wahyudi, 2020, p. 12). Furthermore, it is stated that in Javanese agrarian societies, rivers are often positioned as sacred spaces, places where humans, nature, and ancestors meet. This phenomenon is clearly seen in the tradition of "resik kali" in Sukoharjo Village, Pacitan.

The **Resik Kali** River Festival is a cultural development of the *resik kali* practice, which was previously carried out as collective community service by the villagers. In the hands of the Song Meri Community and local residents, the practice of cleaning the river has not only been preserved, but also recontextualized into a festival that involves more stakeholders, including communities in the hamlets around the river. This transformation reflects what Turner (1969) refers to as the process of *reinvigorating tradition*, which is when tradition is renewed without eliminating its basic ritual structure. As Turner emphasized, "rituals can expand their meaning through renewal of form without breaking their symbolic continuity" (Turner, 1969, p. 112). Thus, this festival enriches the meaning of *resik kali* through the integration of performing arts that expand residents' immersive experience of the river as an ecological and spiritual space.



Although transformed into a festival format, the ritual value inherent in the *resik kali* practice is still maintained. From a cultural ecology perspective, this kind of ritual renewal can be a strategy that strengthens the relationship between humans and their ecological landscape (Ingold, 2000, p. 45). The integration of performing arts allows residents to reinterpret the river not only as a natural resource, but also as a symbolic space that connects the body, the environment, and spirituality. This is in line with Schechner's (2013) view that "performance can expand ritual into a dialogical and participatory public act" (p. 89). The festival ultimately becomes a forum for the community to celebrate their ecological identity through a more inclusive aesthetic medium.

Within the festival structure, the role of the artist is not singular. Artists play a dual position as initiators, artistic conceptors, and performers. This multidimensional role reinforces the concept of *the artist as facilitator*, where artists not only create works but also develop collaborative spaces for the community (Kester, 2011, p. 63). By acting as partners of the Song Meri Community, the artists encouraged the creation of a space for creativity that drew on the local experiences and knowledge of the villagers. As Bishop (2012) stated, "community-based art practices require artists to shift their position from sole authority to co-creators in a broader social ecology" (p. 27).

The artists' direct involvement in the creative process with the residents is what enables the *Resik Kali* festival to be an artistic practice that is not only aesthetic but also social—reconnecting relationships between residents and between residents and the river. This collaboration demonstrates how art can function as a medium for negotiating meaning and revitalizing traditions, while strengthening the capacity of village communities to create their own environmentally-based cultural knowledge.

The *Resik Kali* Festival, the role of the Song Meri Community is not only as technical implementers, but as conceptual drivers that connect traditional values, ecological awareness, and contemporary art practices. The artist himself also performed as a reader of poetry written by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). The artist's presence as a performer emphasized the participatory and collaborative nature of the festival, where the boundaries between creators and the community became fluid.

This research and creation are important to understand how ecological and symbolic practices work in a community-based art event. This paper is structured using the framework of art creation methods, namely exploration, formulation of artistic ideas, design of the work, and realization of the work. The theoretical analysis refers to the concepts of cultural ecology, participatory aesthetics, and spatial dramaturgy.

2. METHOD

This research adopts *Practice-Based Research* (PaR) as its methodological framework, in which artistic practice is placed at the center of knowledge production. In this approach, the process of creating works for the 2025 *Resik Kali* River Festival is not merely an object of study, but also a research method in itself, so that new knowledge is generated partly through practice and through the creative artifacts that are created (Candy, 2006, p. 45). Thus, creators

can divide the creation of works in the Resik Kali River Festival into four stages:

2.1. Exploration

This stage includes field observations and in-depth studies of local traditions. Researchers conduct interviews with residents, cultural figures, and community leaders to understand the meaning of *resik kali* and the series of agricultural rituals surrounding it, including transformation practices, with the following steps:

2.1.1. Field observation

The researcher conducted observations to understand the social and cultural context of the community in Jarum Hamlet, a village near the location of the *Resik Kali* ritual. These observations were participatory in nature. According to Spradley, participatory observation is the primary method in ethnography because it allows researchers to capture cultural meaning through direct experience (Spradley, 2006, pp. 54-56).

In the context of the *Resik Kali* ritual, this exploration included observing river cleaning activities, ritual preparations, relationships between actors, and the symbols that emerged.

2.1.2. Deepening local traditions

The author conducted in-depth research by reading local history, cultural archives, and traditional practices that are still ongoing. According to Koentjaraningrat, in-depth research on traditions must include symbolic meanings, social functions, and ritual structures (Koentjaraningrat, 2009, pp. 196-188). This approach is very helpful in understanding the ecological and spiritual values in *resik kali*.

2.1.3. Participatory Interviews

The researchers conducted interviews with residents, village elders/leaders, community leaders, and ritual practitioners. The interviews were qualitative in nature, allowing the researchers to explore the subjects' experiences in depth (Creswell, 2013, pp. 239-241).

This interview also uses *oral history* techniques because some traditions are passed down through oral storytelling. *Oral history* is a method of collecting historical data or information through recorded and planned interviews with individuals who have memories, experiences, or direct knowledge of past events.

2.1.4. Community involvement

Following Balfour's assumption in his study of *community-engaged performance*, he emphasizes that community involvement enables fair collaboration, rather than exploitative relationships (Balfour, 2009, p. 86). In this case, the artists not only collected data but also built dialogue with local residents and communities. They contributed to the basis of the activities, and then the artists provided *supporting* facilitation, ideas, and new concepts that led to the involvement of the younger generation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Gethek Parade

The *gethek* parade, which started from the Sukoharjo Village Hall to the riverbank—right next to the bridge—was the initial series of events that emphasized the collective movement of residents towards a sacred space. Four hamlets participated in this parade by carrying *gethek* together, accompanied by a children's drum band, hadrah, and dances performed by residents. The involvement of different age groups and artistic elements makes this procession more than just a physical movement; it is a form of social action that strengthens communal ties. This is in line with the view that public processions in a cultural context can serve as a mechanism for forming solidarity and shared identity (Sedyawati, 2014, p. 211).

The procession also serves as a symbol of ritual movement that affirms the transition from the profane space to the sacred space of the river. In the context of community performativity, the journey together to the ritual location is a form of "embodied symbolism" that unites the body, space, and cultural meaning (Yuliman, 2016, p. 67). This procession shows how the community reactivates its spiritual and ecological relationship with the river through performative actions that have been passed down from generation to generation, while allowing space for creative adaptation in line with current artistic developments and social needs. Thus, the *gethek* parade plays an important role as an opening stage that connects residents, traditions, and the environment in a unified ritual-artistic narrative.



Image: Participants in the *gethek* parade, led by a marching band from the local community.



Image: The picture shows parade participants carrying several offerings as part of the traditional ritual.

3.2 Performance on the Riverbank

The ceremony begins with a communal prayer, memetri, and cutting of the tumpeng as a form of respect for the ancestors and an expression of gratitude for the community's continued existence. The communal prayer becomes a collective space for combining hopes, while the practices of memetri and cutting the tumpeng represent the relationship between humans and agrarian values and the cycle of life. In the context of Javanese culture, this type of ritual emphasizes that symbolic actions are a way for communities to maintain the continuity of tradition (Geertz, 1973, p. 94).



Image: A performance on land as a pre-event is shown by early childhood education (PAUD) children from an outdoor school.

The glass gamelan performance, PAUD music, Hadrah, and dance performed by the HIMPAUDI group demonstrate cross-generational involvement in the same cultural space. The involvement of early childhood to traditional art groups shows how cultural values are transmitted through performativity, both formally and informally. As explained by Turner (1969, p. 52), participation in rituals and performances creates a "communitas" experience, which is a condition of equality that unites community members regardless of age or social status.

Sitting in a circle around *the gethek* becomes a visual symbol of the circle of life, togetherness, and equality among the ceremony participants. This circular structure creates a social space without hierarchy, reinforcing the idea of equality in the village community. The circular form in ritual practice is often understood as a cosmological representation that connects humans with nature and each other (Eliade, 1959, p. 128). Through this symbolic spatial arrangement, the community reaffirms the harmonious relationships that form the basis of collective life.

3.3 Performance on the River

The performance on the river is the core part of the festival, taking place on the river. Music from the bridge sets the mood, followed by the launch of *the gethek*. The floating *gethek* is used as a space for dance, mantra, music, and poetry. The audience is on *the gethek*, which moves with the current, creating an embodied experience.

Three dancers (Ayu, Rani, Yulia) dance with the motif of "green, current, flow." The symbolic ritual of *suwukan pari* and the scattering of fish seeds become ecological practices that reinforce the meaning of sustainability. The poetic dialogue between the artist and Pak Andi brings the dramaturgy of the river space to life.



Image: Performance by dancer Ayu Kusumarwadani (Solo)

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Reversing the Position of the Audience

The process of formulating artistic ideas in this festival focuses on reversing the position of the audience as a strategy to create a more immersive aesthetic experience. The audience, who were previously in a static space on land, are moved onto *gethek*, traditional rafts that move with the river current. This shift in position is in line with the concept of aquatic space as a medium of experience, where the movement of water becomes part of the dramaturgy of the performance. As noted by Widodo, "changing the position of the audience can shift the way they interpret the body, space, and artistic events" (Widodo, 2017, p. 62). Thus, *the gethek* functions not only as a means of transportation, but also as an aesthetic device that opens up new interactions between the audience, the river, and the performance.

The placement of the audience on *the gethek* also reinforces the principle of the performativity of moving space, an approach that allows the audience to experience the performance dialogically. Artistic experiences that involve physical movement "strengthen the sensory connection between the audience and the performance landscape" (Lestari, 2020, p. 119). In the context of a festival, the flow of the river becomes the dramaturgy itself—regulating the rhythm, distance, and visual perspective of the audience. This creates an aesthetic experience that is difficult to achieve through a static performance space.

Although this idea offers strong artistic potential, its implementation has not been fully optimized. Not all audience members can board the *gethek* due to technical limitations, including the limited number of *gethek* and insufficient preparation time. These technical obstacles are common in community-based artistic work, as Prasetya notes that "resource limitations often restrict the full implementation of artistic concepts, although they do not diminish the value of creative ideas" (Prasetya, 2018, p. 88). Thus, the festival continues to be held with a combination of spectators on *the gethek* and spectators on the riverbank.

These limitations are an important reflection for the development of the festival in the future. Strengthening production capacity, increasing the number of *gethek*, and technical collaboration with local craftsmen could open up opportunities to present a format where the audience moves entirely with the river current. This is in line with Yuliani's idea that innovation in performing arts "requires continuous integration between artistic ideas and the community's readiness to realize them" (Yuliani, 2019, p. 134). Thus, the idea of reversing the position of the audience remains relevant as an artistic development direction that pushes the festival towards a more profound performative experience.

3.4.2 Artistic Analysis

The integration of artistic analysis in the context of creating a work is a combination of analytical and aesthetic processes that run simultaneously. On the one hand, the analytical process includes critical observation, analysis of the elements of a phenomenon, and interpretation of the social, cultural, ecological, and material contexts surrounding the work. This process requires precision in reading symptoms and experiences so that artists can identify relevant structures, patterns, and meanings. As stated by Rohidi (2019),

understanding socio-cultural phenomena is an important foundation for the formulation of artistic creativity because works of art are never separated from the reality that underlies them (p. 45).

On the other hand, the artistic process is a stage of translating the results of analysis into aesthetic form exploration. This process involves media experimentation, the search for visual or performative language, and the selection of presentation strategies that can accommodate creative ideas. Artists strive to build a dialectic between analytical findings and aesthetic intuition, so that the resulting work is not only expressive but also conceptually sharp. Pranata (2020) refers to this kind of working pattern as an effort to harmonize "body knowledge" and "reflective knowledge" in contemporary artistic practice (p. 93), where the creative process becomes a meeting ground between rationality and sensitivity.

Analytical-artistic can thus be understood as a creative approach that positions artists as researchers. Artists read social, cultural, ecological, or artistic material phenomena through a series of observations, reflections, and dialogues with their contexts, then formulate creative responses through a process of experimentation with form and production of works. This approach produces works that are not only based on spontaneity but also supported by a deep reading of reality. This is in line with Hadi's (2017) idea that artist-researchers work within the framework of "inquiry-based creation," namely creation that departs from questions and in-depth investigations into the social and material world in which the work is rooted (p. 112).

In the context of the *Resik Kali* River Festival, the artists used an analytical-artistic approach to examine the relationship between the community and the river from a cultural ecology perspective. The river is not only understood as a physical space, but as a landscape of meaning that shapes the patterns of life, imagination, and identity of an agrarian community. This reading allows the artist to see how daily practices, cosmological values, and local knowledge are intertwined in a simultaneous relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality. Thus, the river is positioned as a living cultural subject that has both ecological and symbolic functions.

Through this understanding, the creators began to formulate a performance structure that reflected the community's closeness to the river. The structure was not only arranged based on aesthetic needs, but also departed from social action patterns inherited through river cleansing rituals, mutual cooperation practices, and community interactions with water as a source of life. This approach allows the dramaturgy of the performance to follow the existing ecological relationships within the community, so that the work is not artificial but rooted in the daily experiences of the residents.

In this process, community action dramaturgy plays an important role. The creators treat community participation as an authentic performative element, not merely a visual complement. Their involvement—from the *gethek* carriers, the hadrah group, the drum band children, to the residents who perform the river cleansing ritual—becomes an integral part of the performance narrative. This community dramaturgy produces a relational art form, where the boundaries between performers and audience become fluid, and the aesthetic experience is present through direct interaction in the ecological space of the river.

The artistic decisions ultimately led to the use of poetry, river cleansing rituals, and performative arrangements that were in harmony with ecological meanings. Poetry was used to evoke emotional and reflective resonance regarding the relationship between humans and nature, while the river cleansing ritual maintained the continuity of tradition while presenting real ecological actions within the performance space. The performative arrangement is designed to flow with the dynamics of the river, allowing water, currents, and natural landscapes to become part of the medium of expression. Thus, the transformation of cultural ecology analysis into artistic form creates a performance that is not only visually beautiful, but also ecologically, socially, and spiritually valuable.



Image: The relationship between nature, humans, and cultural ecology



Image: The artist also serves as a performer, reciting a poem by SBY alongside Mr. Andi Malarangeng.

4. CONCLUSION

The *Resik Kali* River Festival presents a form of culture-based ecological art that combines agrarian rituals, performing arts, and community participation into one living entity. Through its artistic creation methods, this festival produces artistic forms that are dialogical, embodied, and ecological—where the body, space, and nature interact simultaneously. The river serves as a performative space that shows how the landscape can be an aesthetic medium, as well as a vehicle for building collective ecological awareness. The artistic experience born from direct interaction with the environment makes this festival not just a spectacle, but an ecological learning space based on the cultural practices of the local community.

This paper emphasizes that the creation of art based on local wisdom is urgent for strengthening cultural identity and ecological sustainability. By placing tradition as a source of inspiration and knowledge, this kind of art creation encourages the development of a more reflective relationship between humans and nature. The integration of local values with contemporary artistic approaches allows the festival to become a space for cultural innovation that remains rooted in its socio-ecological context. Through this practice, art functions not only as a medium of expression, but also as a cultural strategy for caring for the environment and strengthening community cohesion.

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