

“Sepuh” in puppetry tradition of *wayang kulit* performance in *ruwatan* ceremony



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ABSTRACT

Ruwatan is a self-cleansing method in Javanese society for those considered *sukerta* (spiritually unclean person). To prevent a misfortune in life, the *sukerta* people must be ritually cleaned. The *Murwakala* performance is led by a *dhalang ruwat* in this *ruwatan* ceremonial procession, therefore a *dhalang* plays an important role. However, several qualifications must be met before being ordained as a *dhalang ruwat* and trusted to lead the *ruwatan sukerta* procession. The objective of the study is to explore the concept of old-aged (*sepuh*) in becoming a *dhalang ruwat*. The descriptive qualitative model was used to develop this study, the results of which were descriptions of field notes in the form of interviews with *dhalang ruwat*, observations, and documentation. The results showed that in order to become a *dhalang ruwat*, one must be descended from a *dhalang ruwat*, be a role model, and have married their offspring. The notion of *sepuh* (old-aged) in becoming a *dhalang ruwat* includes being psychologically mature in terms of age, as well as being spiritually capable in terms of social position.

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Article History

Received 2024-04-22

Revised 2024-05-12

Accepted 2024-05-15

Keywords

Dhalang ruwat
Murwakala
Ruwatan
Sepuh
Sukerta

1. Introduction

Traditions are behaviors that have been passed down through the generations and are still followed in a community because they are deemed to be the most suitable and ideal ones [1]. Wayang is a traditional Indonesian performance art, especially popular in Java [2], has been used for rituals against evil (*ruwatan*) [3]. A *dhalang* (puppeteer) performs the traditional *ruwatan* ritual to drive out evil [4]. *Ruwatan* is a ritual performance involving local or Javanese traditions. This *ruwatan* sacred ceremony is believed to protect the organizer from misfortune in life, additionally referred to as *sukerta* [5]. *Sukerta* refers to a person considered defective or faulty, that his life includes dirt that will obstruct his life route in the future [6]. *Sukerta* must be cleansed or ruwat in order to be free of the Bhatara Kala prey category [7]. *Ruwatan* is a self-purification method [8]. This *ruwatan* is also known as *murwakala*, defeating and controlling the Kala, which means time, where as time passes in one's life, one can reach what is often referred to as inner and outer peace [9]. A *dhalang sejati* 'true puppeteer' will lead a *ruwatan wayang* performance. A *dhalang sejati* is a leading puppeteer who has the permission to conduct the *ruwatan* ritual and to be able to remove misfortune or purify the *sukerta* (spiritually unprotected) of the person being proceed into a *ruwatan* ceremony. In addition, as a *dhalang ruwat*, one must be held responsible for the safety of everyone in the show, including all members of the accompaniment or puppeteer team, guests, and audiences present. In the *ruwatan* tradition, the ritual is usually carried out by an aged puppeteer (*dhalang sepuh*).

The term '*sepuh*' refers to a person with extensive knowledge and expertise in carrying out ancient Javanese rites. Meanwhile, *dhalang ruwat* refers to the position of a puppeteer or event organizer in *ruwatan*. From a standpoint of society, the concept of the aged puppeteer is intriguing to study. In general, in neighborhoods that value elders/old-aged people (*sepuh*), bearing in mind they play a major role in directing, advising, and assisting the younger

generation. Because of their knowledge of customs, culture, and history, they frequently serve as sources of inspiration and role models for society. In Javanese culture, *sepuh* refers to older people who are valued for their age, knowledge, and life experience. *Sepuh* need to be preserved as trusted individuals in society because the ideals and wisdom they hold may help lead and sustain peace throughout social groups. The younger generation can profit from the experiences and knowledge of *sepuh* through involvement and respect for elders, while *sepuh* are valued and acknowledged in society. However, it is also essential to realize that the concept of elders varies among cultures and communities, and there is no single definition that can properly define the meaning and role of the elderly in different social contexts. *Sepuh* has a highly important implication and position in Javanese culture.

Dhalang ruwat is a chosen puppeteer by the people of Central Java to lead and carry out the *ruwatan* procession is not just an ordinary puppeteer. To become a *ruwat* puppeteer, one must be a descendant of a *ruwat* puppeteer, in addition to performing fasting. Overseeing the *ruwatan* performance, especially leading the major *ruwatan* event. This indicates that during the *ruwatan* ritual ceremony. Ki Manteb Soedarsono noted in a conversation on puppetry that *ruwat* puppeteers must satisfy three conditions in order to be considered authentic puppeteers. However, as time passed, the situation turned opinions on *dhalang ruwat* into a type of logocentrism that was almost impermeable to critical thought. A component of life experienced by people engaged in the art of puppetry appears to leave a dualism between truth and claims about truth, with an analogue to the term *dhalang sejati*. Habermas' [10], views on the sacredness of the claim that *dhalang sejati* can be used as a means for particular purposes, in contrast to the concept of *sepuh* in Javanese culture as a source of "*pana ing pamawas, lebda ing pitutur*" or someone who genuinely appreciates and comprehends life's perfection. The seniority of a *dhalang* figure in shadow puppet performances in *ruwatan* ceremony needs a deep understanding to see how cultural intellectuals, like *dhalang*, play a significant role in preserving the authenticity and continuity of the shadow puppet tradition in *ruwatan* ceremony. Senior *dhalangs* typically have substantial expertise and understanding in *wayang kulit* performances, including scripts, plays, the use of classical Javanese language, and stage management.

The implications for community *ruwatan* ceremony in Java are significant, including the fact that senior *dhalang* have a greater awareness of the ideas and purposes that underpin *ruwatan* ceremonies [11]. They can ensure that the spiritual messages and local wisdom conveyed by *wayang kulit* performance remain confidential and holy during *sukerta* cleaning event in *ruwatan*. Senior *dhalang* frequently have better artistic and storytelling skills, which can improve the overall quality of the shadow puppet performance at the *ruwatan* ceremony. In addition, to determine and confirm a *wayang* puppeteer as *dhalang sejati*, a few verbal and nonverbal methods have been used. Having acknowledged as a sort of representation of the Almighty, a *dalang sejati* has the power to provide solutions for *sukerta* in order to obtain an improved level of life. *Ruwatan* is basically a form of prayer to the Almighty [12]. This *dhalang sepuh ruwatan* has been traditionally considered as a *dhalang sejati* (the eligible puppeteer) [13]. Several *dhalang sejati* characteristics can be proclaimed and referred to, including: if a *dhalang* is a descendant of a *dhalang ruwat*, he can be a role model or beyond reproach in his social status, has previously carried out several *laku tirakat* (abstention practices), and in each will hold *ruwatan* as *dhalang* he has performed fasting (*ngirangi*) [14].

The centrality of the term *sepuh* (old aged) in Javanese culture demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the wisdom, experience, and traditions of older generations. The concept of *sepuh* further emphasizes the importance of intergenerational ties in Javanese culture, as the younger generation values and respects the *sepuh*'s knowledge and wisdom. In *ruwatan*, the concept of *dhalang sepuh* is viewed as transforming tradition into a type of hegemony. *Dhalangs* who have not become sufficiently old age are unable to take part in the *ruwatan* procession because the term *dhalang ruwat* must be defined as *sepuh*. *Ruwatan* performance is firmly established in the hearts of the supporting community and may even nurture the independent strength of diverse religions that merge into one in conserving the ancient performance works of their ancestors and containing hyper-spirituality of belief [15]. Efendi *et al.*, accentuated that *ruwatan* is mass culture that is concealed in cultural myths, in addition to a decrease of *ruwat*

puppeteers due to the constrained prerequisites for being a *dhalang ruwat* [11]. In line with the uses, objectives, and qualities of *ruwatan*, this ritual is not corresponded to be carried out by anyone, by any means, or at any time. A *ruwatan* Murwakala can only be performed by specified performers and is facilitated by standard facilities that help with Murwakala performance [13]. Efendi *et al.*, sees this as a type of hegemonic exercise based on a discursive enactment of *dhalang trah* (a descendent of Ki Lebdajiwa) which is intended to normalize particular situations [16]. Bearing in mind the complicated traditional systems and issues behind this ceremonial event to the *ruwatan* supporting community, this study, therefore, was aimed at exploring ideas related to development of Javanese cultural values as a complex enrichment of Javanese cultural theory in *ruwatan* ceremony. It notably contributes to the finding of solutions to the criteria for becoming a *dhalang sejati*, a *dhalang sepuh* who truly masters the perfection of the life cycle, and the implementation of the *sepuh* concept in *ruwatan* performances.

2. Method

This study was designed using the descriptive qualitative method since it is relevant to the results obtained in the form of data about participants' perceptions obtained through a process of in-depth attention, providing complex explanations, and being able to reveal meanings and understanding that have been complicated to express [17]. The primary research data was obtained from *dhalang ruwat* sources through interviews with *dhalang ruwat* people who were used as sources during the study process and direct observations in the field that were compatible with the *ruwatan* data criteria. The text of the story "Serat Murwakala" by R M Citrakusuma, published by Tan Kun Swi Kediri in 1926 [11], Serat Pustaka Candra" by Pujono S and Dra. S.A. Satiti, published by the Central Java Regional Language and Literature Development Project in 1989, and R Tanaja's 1971 essay writing entitled "Riwayat Pangeran Pandjangmas Leluhuripun Para Dalang Karaton Mataram-Kartasura-Surakarta" [18]. In this study, the data was obtained using both interactive and non-interactive approaches [19]. The technique employed in interviews was interactive, while the literature studies were not [20]. Both the collected data were divided down into three techniques: interviews, observation, and content analysis. Through interacting conversations, interviews were carried out to collect data from the *dhalang ruwat*. Observations were conducted in order to directly see the *ruwat* tradition being carried out by the old-aged *dhalang ruwats*. Furthermore, the obtained data were analyzed in order to determine the basis of the collected data. To address issues, interactive analysis is used, which includes methods of data analysis such as data selection, data collection, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification, see Fig. 1.

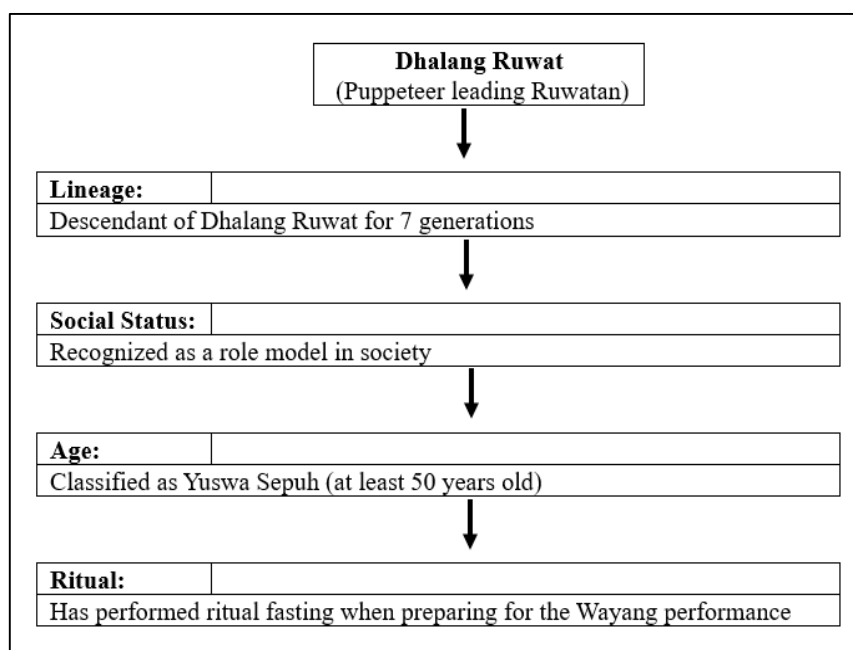


Fig 1. Data analysis method

In Fig. 1, the *Dhalang Ruwat* as *Dhalang Sejati* is depicted at the top, surrounded by a box representing the criteria that must be met. Each criterion is listed within the box, including lineage, social status, age, and ritual fasting. These criteria collectively define the legitimate position of the *Dhalang Ruwat* in leading a *Ruwatan Wayang* performance within the semiotic model of culture analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Dhalang Ruwat*: The Intellectual Actor behind *Ruwatan* Tradition

People who supported *ruwatan* had such faith in the powers of the *dhalang sejati* that if someone were to conduct this performance, they would surely seek for or present a *dhalang ruwat* entitled *dhalang sejati*. The data was collected through conversations with *dhalang ruwat*. According to Subalidinata [14], a *dhalang* who may be or will lead a *ruwatan wayang* performance must meet several criteria, including being labeled a *dhalang sejati*, which means a descendant of the *dhalang ruwat*, having a social status that is a role model or above reproach, and being classified as *yuswa sepuh*, the individual is elderly (at least 50 years old) and has met various ritual criteria, including having the capacity to do *ngirangi*/fasting in preparation for the performance. Feinstein contends that the *dhalang ruwat*'s predecessors must have been in the seventh generation. It was additionally stated that *dhalang sejati* is the legitimate *dhalang* from a *dhalang*'s lineage, either from his father's or mother's line. The development of time has culminated in several changes including overhauls of old conventional models. One of the factors contributing to the decline of *dhalang ruwat* is the need to be a descendant of a *dhalang ruwat*. Another factor is society's worldview, which has evolved in response to current trends. This is affected by external beliefs that society receives through various distribution means. Following this attitude, we proposed that the influence of the *dhalang ruwat* extinction was undermined from two distinct perspectives at once, namely inside and externally. The hypothesis is based on different claims by *dhalang sepuh* for the *ruwat* tradition and observations in the field when the *dhalang sepuh* in the *ruwat* carry out the *ruwatan* tradition.

We discovered a cultural reality related to the *ruwatan* tradition. Prior to the development of major religions in Indonesia, the *ruwatan* ritual was the main reference for self-cleansing. In other words, the *ruwatan* tradition is a type of spiritual logocentrism, which also implies it is a symbol of imperial power. This indicates that in the field of cultural studies, the *ruwatan* tradition is a semiotic model of culture. Based on advertising strategy study, the phenomena of puppetry society are a sort of contestation amongst puppeteers that manifests as a problem or conflict. This is in line with Camus' opinion that intellectuals must stand with people who are marginalized by doing studies and findings that do not diverge from present-day challenges [21]. If this struggle is not carried out, the extinction of *dhalang ruwat* will be unavoidable in the next generation. The presence of the *dhalang ruwat* frequently employs the emotional movement of primordialism, specifically through a magical-religious framework or mythological thinking, to accomplish the aim of hegemony [22]. Kerr *et al.*, proceeded to contend in their research that symbolic resistance distinctly characterises foreign power as a danger to stability [23]. However, in this context, a foreign force needs to be understood as a power that is not human.

The ethical element of this *ruwatan* is found in its religious aspect, namely the soul or spiritual excellence or essence of the *ruwatan*. Meanwhile, the emics element may be found in the symbols or numerous symbols used throughout the *ruwatan* ceremony. *Ruwatan* is simply an instrument for restoring a person to something pure essential (the most fundamental purity the *fitrah*), especially returning the individual to God, for God is what is meant by pure essential. The belief is that once a person has returned or is able to exhibit his or her pure essence as a source of power for himself, that person will be able to overcome numerous difficulties. The general criteria for a *dhalang ruwat*, based on facts in the community, is that it must be a *dhalang sejati*. Becker explained [24], that a true *dhalang sejati* is described as follows: *dhalang sejati* [a true/pure *dhalang*] performs as a guard, performing cleaning rituals against disorder, poverty, and grief, and teaching the secrets of mysticism, bringing wealth and tranquility to the heart.

The *dhalang sejati* should not expect payment for his efforts, although in the past, his services were rewarded with offerings and the like.

3.2. *Dhalang Sejati* in *Ruwatan Murwakala* Tradition

A *dhalang ruwat* is an individual in the *ruwatan* ceremony who is spiritually accountable for whatever happens during the *ruwatan* ceremony performance. *Dhalang ruwat* are commonly referred to as spiritual teachers, sages, or priests who have a naturally religious mentality. Considering that their aim is to restore *ruwatan* people to their pure essence or consciousness of *purwaning dumadi* (the end of the universe's creation) [25]. A *dhalang sejati*, as a symbol, could have a dynamic meaning. In the context of reproduction, *dhalang ruwat* or *dhalang sejati* surely goes through a process to produce meaning as well as a process of modifying its supporting community. The present way of thinking of society considers *dhalang ruwat* as its implementers, regardless of whether they believe as legitimately entitled to conduct the *ruwatan* ceremony, it is not sure that this legacy would be accepted in its entirety with the construction of their points of view. The truth could be different; this meaning has been transformed to current society's way of thinking, which continually desires to preserve its power for the purpose of competent capital in the economy as a result of reproduction. Reproduction, as an element in changing various cultural expressions, involves creating new groupings, confirming on new definitions, and delivering new meanings. Cultural reproduction is a fluid process that requires adaptability [26]. Ki Manteb Soedarsono, the *dhalang ruwat* appointed by Suharto, the former 2nd President of the Republic of Indonesia in 1986 [27], explained that if one wants to become a *dhalang ruwat*, he must first through a learning process. For sure, the knowledge comes from a senior *dhalang ruwat*, and he emphasizes that this person is more than just "*ora sakkarepe dewe*" [not by chance]. It was further added that a *dhalang ruwat* must also be from a *dhalang ruwat* lineage, which could be from a grandfather or parent. This is intended to ensure that the genetic purity of a *dhalang ruwat* is maintained, just like the oath that is taken when being ordained to someone as a *dhalang ruwat*. Apart from that, a person must have married his child or daughter-in-law, and he must not be a widower, let alone have two wives, he must not violate religious taboos, which are among the obligatory requirements for *dhalang ruwat* [28].

According to Subalinata's opinion of the requirements for becoming a *dhalang ruwat*, the social standing must be that of a role model or above reproach, as well as that of an older person (at least 50 years old) [29]. Ki Manteb Soedarsono's opinion reinforces up Subalinata's. To become a *dhalang ruwat*, one must also have married off their children or in-laws, implying that one must be aged or mature. Ki Hardo Suti, a well-known *dhalang* who was influential in the implementation of *ruwatan* rites in the Eromoko district, Wonogiri area, and surrounding areas, explained that a *dhalang ruwat* has to be able to trace the genealogical relationship of five generations of puppeteers on both sides of the family (*dhalang sejati*). During the *ruwatan* ceremony, Ki Hardo Suti declared himself a *dhalang ruwat* descendant of Ki Ngadio, Ki Ngadio a descendant of Ki Brayud, Ki Brayud a descendant of Ki Cermo Digda, and so forth until he reached Ki Hardo Suti, but there has been a shift in the form of a softening of genealogical rules. *Dhalang ruwat*, that is, a *dhalang ruwat* does not have to be the most senior member in a family (before, the oldest place in the order of siblings was essential). Ki. Hardo Suti further explained that if the *ruwatan* ceremony is not led by a *dhalang ruwat* based on its genealogy (*dhalang sejati*), then a person is considered to cause terrible disruptions. Based on the dress code, *dhalang ruwat* must wear a *Temanggungan jarik* style (a typical palace sarong), as well as a black jacket and a *belangkon*. According to Ki. Hardo Suti, a *dhalang ruwat* is supposed to walk on foot to the location of the *ruwatan* ceremony while holding a stick made of *lotrok* wood and a shroud called *mori*. *Dhalang ruwat* in the Klaten and Wonogiri areas must be a descendent of Ki Panjangmas. This confirms our field data and other researchers' findings that the *dhalang* in Sukoharjo, Klaten, Surakarta, and Wonogiri identified Ki Panjangmas as their forefather [11], [30]. Ki. Panjangmas (or Ki Lebda Jiwa) was an outstanding puppeteer during the Mataram Kingdom's reign of Sultan Agung (1613-1643), and he was the only puppeteer who had exclusive access to the *ruwatan* ceremony until 1680 [26]. According to Ki Blacius Subono, a senior *dhalang* in Surakarta and a lecturer in the Department of Puppetry at ISI Surakarta, being a *ruwat* puppeteer does not need being a descendant of Ki Panjangmas or having grandchildren.

A *dhalang ruwat*, on the other hand, must be someone who can be trusted, a powerful person in the context of Javanese society, and well-behaved.

3.3. Sepuh in Puppetry Tradition

Sepuh is a Javanese term that means *tua* 'old-aged', which according to the Javanese scholar Suparto Broto, the term *tua* means "old" / *tuwa ateges ngenteni me-tu-ne nya-wa*, which means that 'waiting for the soul to leave the body', *sejatining sepuh* 'how one should be a parent' [31]. Being aged is not easy, since it implies death, and some people even get senile and forget a lot. Consequently, even if they are old, individuals must study in order to not be ignorant, according to the words of an old-aged *dhalang*. Old-aged people who lack knowledge could find themselves in two extreme situations. The first is that they feel old, slow, and unwell, as if they cannot achieve anything, have no access to anything, and are no longer anything. Such old men, *sepi*, *sepo*, *lir sepah samun* [32]. *Sepi* means the one who feels lonely because they lack friends and acquaintances. *Sepo* is living in discomfort, eating and drinking in discomfort, and sitting, walking, and sleeping in discomfort. *Sepah* feels like waste, no longer usable in social settings. *Samun* felt he had lost his self-esteem and became excluded from social gatherings. That type of old-aged person will generate a stuffy heart, eventually leading to dissatisfaction and melancholy. Those who are old generally complain and are unable to be grateful to *Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala*'s bounties. Then, old-aged whose behavior in the so called *gonjak ganjuk* association (organization) truly humiliating. *Gonjak ganjuk* indicates that his speech and actions are improper for his age. Because when someone believes that he is bright or capable, he will talk a lot about his personal opinions, don't want to be battled against, and unable to discuss issues and constantly look for other people's admiration. Because they have lost their power, such parents suffer from post-power syndrome.

Waspodo ing semu, which means understanding other people's desires even though they don't express them, is an example of what parents should be, *siteman sinamudono*, that despite his intelligence, he always retains it in his heart. Intelligence and expertise are not arrogantly presented. When asked for his opinion, he does so in a courteous manner and never dismisses other people. How should one act as an elderly person? Thus, there are numerous methods for being an aged-person, which must begin with reflection of one's inadequacies; since one are still granted life by *Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala*, you must continue working whatever one's job is, and it is advised that it is best to do anything linked to a pastime. Gardening, singing, writing novels, cooking, and other activities. It is best to continue learning in order to encourage increasing scientific knowledge. One may learn through reading books and hanging out with friends. Remember that studying will constantly sharpen your thoughts. The eagerness to study will also serve as a role model for children and grandchildren. The hypothesis which seniority can be used to offer someone from ordinary backgrounds with exceptional advantages to become a *dhalang ruwat* in the *ruwatan* tradition is an intriguing idea. The consequences can be extremely important in terms of conserving and growing the *ruwatan* legacy. This idea is supported by a variety of viewpoints, including the acknowledgment of experience and knowledge [11], [30].

In this context, seniority is defined not only by age, but also by experience and expertise of running shadow puppet shows in *ruwatan* ceremonies. A *dhalang* who hails from common people but has long been active in *wayang kulit* performances may have gained enough understanding to interpret and communicate *ruwatan* stories well. Increasing inclusivity by allowing people from all backgrounds to become a *dhalang ruwat*. This could be a technique to prevent elitism and guarantee that *ruwatan* skills and knowledge are shared more evenly within the community. By providing individuals from ordinary groups the opportunity to become a *dhalang ruwat*, this method can foster novel skills within the community. This can increase people's interest and engagement in *wayang kulit* performance while also enriching the tradition's artistic diversity. According to this concept, an individual's skill and dedication to the art of shadow puppetry are the most important factors in being appointed as a *dhalang ruwat*. This enables for recognition of the hard work and dedication involved in studying and recreating the *ruwatan* tradition. However, it is crucial to stress that the use of this idea may necessitate significant adaptations and considerations from society and relevant parties. Formal

or non-formal education, training, and objective evaluation of performance quality may be required to support the effective implementation of this concept.

4. Conclusion

The leadership role of a *dhalang* in the *ruwatan Murwakala* ceremony carries significant cultural and spiritual weight, requiring adherence to specific requirements and a deep respect for tradition. To become a *dhalang ruwat*, one must not only meet the tangible prerequisites but also embody the essence of being a *sepuh* – an elder esteemed for their wisdom and experience. Upholding Javanese traditions and showing reverence to the *sepuh* through acts of appreciation and deference fosters continuity and preservation of cultural heritage. By honoring the *sepuh*, we not only honor the past but also ensure the vitality of Javanese values for generations to come. To further enhance the understanding and appreciation of the role of elders or *dhalang sepuh* in conducting the *ruwatan* ceremony within Javanese customs, future studies could explore several avenues such as focusing on historical and anthropological analysis to delve deeper into the historical context of the *ruwatan* ceremony and its significance within Javanese society. Understanding the evolution of this tradition over time can provide valuable insights into its cultural importance and the role of elders in its perpetuation. By undertaking these research avenues, scholars can deepen their understanding of the cultural, social and spiritual dimensions of the *ruwatan* ceremony and contribute to its continued appreciation and preservation within Javanese customs.

Acknowledgment

We are profoundly thankful to important informants of *dhalang ruwat* who have provided us with the relevant data. We would not have been possible without the informants' support and nurture. The author would like to thank Universitas Veteran Bangun Nusantara (UNIVET), Sukoharjo for the granted supports.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : AE; research idea, analyzed the data, and wrote the article; HRS, ADJ, PDM analyzed the data and wrote the article.
- Funding statement** : The research underlying our paper has received no external funding.
- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare no conflict of interest.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

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