



From the Ritual Arena to the Political Arena: *Reog* Ponorogo, the *Paguron* Network, and Ideological Contestation, 1945–1966

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Abstract: This article examines the transformation of *Reog* Ponorogo from a village ritual arena into a contested instrument of political mobilization between 1945 and 1966. Unlike Wilson's (1999) study, which centers on spirituality and power relations within the *warok-gemblak* tradition, this article explicitly traces how the *paguron* structure, the personal teacher-student bond within the *warok* community was repurposed as an infrastructure for party political mobilization, spanning Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo (BRP/PKI), Barisan *Reog* Nasional (BREN), and Cabang Kesenian *Reog* Agama (Cakra/NU). Employing a critical historical method that combines oral history with archival triangulation including video footage from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia and contemporary colonial and national press the article finds that the politicization of *Reog* reached its peak at the 1965 National Congress of Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo in Madiun, before undergoing selective depoliticization following the G30S/PKI events. The color-coding of the *penadon* costume accessory and the performance's musical repertoire are shown as markers of invented tradition in Hobsbawm's sense, while tensions between conflicting oral testimonies are read through Halbwachs's framework of collective memory and Portelli's account of the subjectivity of oral sources. The article contributes to broadening the historiographical understanding of *Reog* Ponorogo beyond a spiritual-performative tradition into a concrete arena of ideological contestation during the Guided Democracy period, while affirming that the impact of G30S/PKI on local tradition operated selectively rather than as total suppression.

Keywords: Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo; collective memory; cultural politics; oral history; *Reog* Ponorogo

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji pergeseran *Reog* Ponorogo dari arena ritual desa menjadi instrumen mobilisasi politik yang diperebutkan berbagai kekuatan ideologis sepanjang 1945-1966. Berbeda dari kajian Wilson (1999) yang menempatkan spiritualitas dan relasi kuasa dalam tradisi *warok-gemblak* sebagai fokus utama, artikel ini menelusuri secara eksplisit bagaimana struktur *paguron* yaitu ikatan personal guru-murid dalam komunitas *warok*, dialihfungsikan menjadi infrastruktur mobilisasi partai politik, dari Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo (BRP/PKI), Barisan *Reog* Nasional (BREN), hingga Cabang Kesenian *Reog* Agama (Cakra/NU). Berbasis metode sejarah kritis yang memadukan sejarah lisan dan triangulasi arsip termasuk rekaman video Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia dan pers kolonial maupun nasional sezaman artikel ini menemukan bahwa politisasi *Reog* mencapai puncaknya pada Musyawarah Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo se-Indonesia 1965 di Madiun, sebelum mengalami depolitisasi selektif pascaperistiwa G30S/PKI. Kode warna *penadon* dan repertoar musik pertunjukan diperlihatkan sebagai penanda invented tradition dalam pengertian Hobsbawm, sementara ketegangan antara kesaksian lisan yang saling berbeda dibaca melalui kerangka memori kolektif Halbwachs dan subjektivitas sumber lisan Portelli. Artikel ini berkontribusi memperluas pemahaman historiografis tentang *Reog* Ponorogo dari sekadar tradisi spiritual-performatif menjadi arena kontestasi ideologis konkret pada periode Demokrasi Terpimpin, sekaligus menegaskan bahwa

dampak G30S/PKI terhadap tradisi lokal bekerja secara selektif, bukan sebagai pemadaman menyeluruh.

Kata Kunci: Barisan Reog Ponorogo; memori kolektif; politik kebudayaan; Reog Ponorogo; sejarah lisan



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Introduction

Reog Ponorogo, as a traditional performing art deeply rooted in East Java, carries a historical trajectory that extends far beyond its function as an icon of regional cultural identity. During the period spanning the independence revolution through the Guided Democracy era (1945–1966) a time marked by sharp ideological contestation in Indonesia, this performing art was transformed into a highly potent strategic instrument for mass political mobilization. The central research problem addressed in this study is how the *paguron*, the traditional *Reog* educational institutions built on patron-client ties between teacher and disciple, were systematically co-opted to polarize grassroots communities into mutually antagonistic ideological factions.

Foundational prior studies, most notably the authoritative work of Ian Douglas Wilson (1999), have examined the existence of the *paguron*, but with a markedly inward-looking analytical tendency focusing on the socio-spiritual dimension, mystical authority, sexuality, and micro-level power relations within the *warok-gemblak* dynamic. This article distinguishes its position by deliberately shifting the analytical vantage point from internal cultural authority to external political instrumentalization. The novelty of this research lies in its historical demonstration of how *paguron* networks were repurposed into institutionalized infrastructure for partisan mobilization a macro-political structural dimension that has, until now, been overlooked and remains unmapped in the academic literature. Building on this gap in the literature, the primary aim of this study is to dissect the anatomy of the *paguron*'s structural transformation, with particular focus on the emergence of cultural-political wings such as the Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo (BRP), affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI); the nationalist-oriented Barisan *Reog* Nasional (BREN); and the Cabang Kesenian *Reog* Agama (Cakra), which served as an instrument of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

To unpack this complexity, the study poses two central research questions: (1) How did this ideological polarization materially manifest in the symbolic markers of performance, such as the adoption of ideological color codes on the *penadon* (the distinctive *Reog* costume) and the recomposition of the musical repertoire? and (2) How did the 1965 G30S/PKI affair (the September 30th Movement) operate selectively to restructure and "cleanse" this community's political landscape without culminating in the eradication of the *Reog* tradition itself? Given that the historical timeframe under investigation necessitates the use of oral history data collected in 2025–2026, this study draws on Maurice Halbwachs's framework of collective memory alongside Alessandro Portelli's argument concerning the subjectivity of oral history. Triangulating oral testimony with visual archives from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI) and contemporaneous press coverage enables a dual-level analytical interpretation: reading testimonies simultaneously as factual records of past political events and as artifacts of post-1965 memory construction shaped by trauma and state censorship. Ultimately, the significance of this research lies in its capacity to reveal how traditional cultural networks can mutate into resilient modern political infrastructure. These findings contribute meaningfully to a more nuanced historiography of the intersection between Indonesia's local

artistic dynamics, shifts in grassroots political history, and the political commodification of post-conflict memory.

Research Methods

This article employs a critical historical method that combines heuristics, source criticism (external and internal), and contextual interpretation of two main types of sources: oral history and contemporary written sources. Oral history was collected through interviews with twelve informants *Reog* artists, community elders, academics, and leaders of civil society organizations in April 2026, with the methodological awareness that most of the testimonies constitute derived memory (accounts of what previous generations recounted, rather than firsthand experience). Written sources include video recordings from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI) of the 1965 All-Indonesia *Reog* Ponorogo Association Conference, reports from Dutch-language colonial newspapers (*Nieuwsgier*, *Java Bode*) and national newspapers (*Suara Merdeka*, *Api Kartini*), as well as secondary references to coverage in *Harian Rakjat*.

Triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing oral testimonies that were both complementary and contradictory for example, the differing accounts by Sunarso and Sarno regarding the color codes of the *penadon* with archival and contemporary press sources, while explicitly flagging claims that have not yet been corroborated by independent sources. The theoretical framework employed includes Benedict Anderson's concept of the patron-client relationship within teacher-student social networks as the infrastructure of revolutionary mobilization in Java; Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory; Alessandro Portelli's concept of the subjectivity of oral sources; and Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition" to interpret the symbolic markers of the performance as constructions deliberately shaped for specific political purposes.

Research Result

***Paguron*, *Warok*, and the Infrastructure of Mobilization in the Early Years of Independence**

In the early years of independence, *Reog* Ponorogo did not exist in a political vacuum. The revolutionary dynamics that swept across nearly all of Indonesia also shaped it, and socio-political forces gradually permeated *Reog* transforming it from a village ritual into a contested instrument of mass mobilization. Edi Purnomo, one of the collective oral sources within the *Reog* community, recounts that starting around 1945, *Reog* began to be utilized as a means of gathering crowds. This claim is explicitly tied to events as early as 1945 and relies on passed-down memories; therefore, it is more accurately interpreted as an early indication that the political utilization of *Reog* was already taking place during the revolution, rather than as a precise chronological marker.

The use of traditional social networks as the infrastructure for revolutionary mobilization was not an anomaly unique to Ponorogo. Benedict Anderson, in "Java in a Time of Revolution," demonstrates that similar patterns were widespread throughout Java during the same period and were rooted in a distinctive feature of Javanese society: the personal bond between a teacher and his students. Anderson traces the roots of this authority to traditional educational institutions young men studied under a figure who provided for their livelihood and, in return, received their unconditional obedience. This teacher figure could be an elderly relative regarded as wise, a *kiai* who runs a *pesantren*, or a local master of invulnerability and *pencak silat*. What makes Anderson's analysis relevant to this study is the possibility of mapping this local master figure onto the Ponorogo context: the master surrounded by students bound by obedience, in

Ponorogo society, is the *warok*. The teacher–student relationship described by Anderson is almost literally evident in the *warok* community the students and *gemblak* who live together, are guided, and are provided for by the *warok*, and in turn repay him with obedience and devotion. It was this structure of personal loyalty that, when the wave of revolution arrived, could be relatively quickly redirected from ritual devotion to political loyalty, allowing *Reog* through its network of *waroks* to function as a mobilization infrastructure that was almost ready for use.

Other accounts reinforce the picture that *Reog* had entered the political sphere from an early stage. Bagong Siswanto, drawing on the memories of his elders, describes how the *Reog* community had been within the political orbit since the very beginning of independence. The unstable conditions following the proclamation of independence created a situation in which various interest groups required deeply rooted social networks; the *Reog* community, with its cross-village networks established since the pre-independence era, became a logical mobilization vehicle for specific agendas.

Drawing on the same layer of collective memory, Purbo Sasongko notes that the *warok* also played a role in the struggle for independence. This account makes sense when viewed through the institutional roots of the *warok* community, namely the *paguron*. As Wilson demonstrates, the *paguron* shapes identity, loyalty, and authority within the *warok* community through discipline and secrecy that bind students to their teachers a network of loyalty that holds the potential for political mobilization.

However, the claim of involvement in the “struggle for independence” itself has not been corroborated by contemporary sources and requires further investigation; it is treated here as communal memory, not as an established historical fact. What is more substantiated is the documented trajectory: the *paguron*’s capacity for mobilization culminated in the involvement of the *warok* and the Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo in the 1948 Madiun Incident, and subsequently in their recruitment by political parties in the following decade.

It is important to refrain from drawing overly neat conclusions here. While *paguron* loyalty did provide a mechanism that allowed the *warok* network to be politically repurposed, it was not the only one, nor was it necessarily the most decisive factor. Economic patronage, organizational inducements, and the broader social divide between the *abangan* and *santri* communities which in Ponorogo crystallized in the long-standing tension between the world of the *warok* and the world of the *pesantren* all operated simultaneously. The *paguron* loyalty thesis, as will become evident in the following testimonies, is actually most compelling when treated as one layer of explanation, not as the sole key.

The inter-party rivalry that characterized the 1950s was also reflected in the configuration of *Reog* Ponorogo groups. Drawing on the oral account of Mbah Tobron, Deddy Satya Amidjaya reveals that the mass base of *Reog* Ponorogo was so vast that various political forces massively infiltrated *Reog* groups to affiliate directly with political parties. There were at least three major political currents within the *Reog* artist community: BRP (Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo), affiliated with the PKI; BREN (Barisan *Reog* Nasional); and Cakra (Cabang Kesenian *Reog* Agama), affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and has a fairly strong mass base in several areas of Ponorogo.

Symbolic Polarization: Music, Color, and Intergroup Violence

According to Mbah Mulyadi, these symbolic boundaries between groups can be identified through the musical accompaniment and lyrics performed during shows. BRP is synonymous with the song “Genjer-Genjer”; BREN uses the same music but with different lyrics; while Cakra performs with its own distinctive style. It should be noted that the association of “Genjer-

Genjer” a folk song from Banyuwangi with the PKI’s identity is partly retrospective; the attribution of meaning itself is part of a process of politicization, not a given fact. This observation suggests that the polarization of *Reog* groups does not always reflect a conscious ideological commitment but is often the result of systematic propaganda mechanisms a pattern that, within Eric Hobsbawm’s framework of “invented traditions,” demonstrates how performance elements that appear “authentic” are in fact consciously reshaped to produce specific effects of loyalty and political legitimacy.

Manifestations of intergroup differentiation are also evident in the visual attributes of the performance. Arim Kamandaka explains that the BRP added red ornaments to the *penadon* they wore, as a marker of the group’s affiliation with the PKI. He himself acknowledges that he was still a child at the time and only came to understand the meaning of these ornaments as an adult, through his acquaintance with K.H. Mujab Tahir. This account is historiographically significant because it demonstrates that politicization permeated even the iconography of the performance, transforming traditional aesthetic elements into symbols that could be clearly interpreted by *Reog* audiences of that era yet another concrete illustration of the “invented tradition” mechanism mentioned above.

Purbo Sasongko emphasizes that *Reog* performances are not merely artistic expressions but actual arenas of political friction. According to accounts he received from elders, performers from different groups would often face off while preparing their weapons *mote’*, a type of short sword behind the peacock-feather headdress, and such clashes frequently occurred on the performance grounds; it should be noted that this detail relies solely on a single testimony and has not yet been corroborated by independent sources such as police archives or contemporary local press. Furthermore, he explains that the structural cohesion of *Reog* groups is rooted in the *paguron* culture that is, the strong teacher–student bond among the *warok* of Ponorogo: when a teacher is affiliated with a particular group, his students tend to follow suit not primarily out of ideological conviction, but rather due to personal loyalty to the teacher within the *paguron* tradition. This explanation aligns with the thesis developed in the previous subsection, while also revealing its limitations: if affiliation flows from teacher to student, it flows as obedience, not as conviction a distinction that would have significant consequences after 1965.

***Reog* on the Diplomatic and State Stage, 1953–1957**

In addition to serving at the local level as a vehicle for political affiliation, during the same decade *Reog* began to appear as a representation of Indonesian culture on a much broader stage. *Suara Merdeka*, September 25, 1953, reported Sutojo’s statement that during the youth festival in Bucharest (Romania), the Indonesian delegation garnered significant attention through its cultural troupe, which performed nearly every night alongside delegations from various countries; among the dances and songs presented Balinese dance, Sundanese dance, legong, Minangkabau pencak, as well as songs from the Moluccas and keroncong “rejog” was also mentioned. This source is valuable because it demonstrates that as early as the 1950s, *Reog* had been incorporated into Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy in Eastern Europe, within the context of a youth festival that was part of the orbit of the progressive youth movement of that era. As a note of caution, the text simply mentions “rejog” without specifying “Ponorogo,” so it cannot be absolutely confirmed that what is meant is *Reog* Ponorogo although its juxtaposition with legong and pencak strengthens that assumption. The brief mention also only confirms the performance’s presence, not its central role, so it still needs to be triangulated with other sources.

At the same time, the perspective on *Reog* among the remaining Dutch-speaking observers reveals a distinct ambivalence. A review in *Nieuwsgier*, February 10, 1954, satirized

the tendency of European art enthusiasts to glorify folk performances such as *kuda kepang* or *rejog* deemed “authentic and pure” solely for their exoticism and age, while looking down on the artists performing in markets and shacks “because they perform for money.” This review, though not originating from Ponorogo, captures how *Reog* was positioned within the aesthetic discourse of that transitional period: celebrated as the purity of tradition yet dismissed when it appeared as a part of everyday folk economic practices.

The fact that *Reog* had also entered the center of state events is documented in *Nieuwsgier*, August 18, 1954, which reported on a garden party celebrating the proclamation of independence held in the palace gardens. Among the performances featured, the *rejog* dance from Ponorogo was explicitly mentioned, though the reporter noted that on the palace stage it failed to achieve the “ferocity” typically displayed at night markets or village squares. This mention confirms that by the mid-1950s, *Reog* Ponorogo had become part of the cultural repertoire performed within presidential circles, while also highlighting the qualitative difference between the orderly palace performances and the dynamic folk performances.

A more explicit identification appeared in *Java Bode* (Jakarta), March 8, 1957, which reported on the Youth Week (Jeugdweek) carnival in Surabaya. In that parade, various regions were represented in their traditional attire, and one region was represented by “Rejog Ponorogo” this time by its full name alongside a Javanese wedding couple, horsemen, Bugis attire, *angklung*, and traditional West Sumatran attire. This is an important post-independence milestone: *Reog* Ponorogo was used as a symbol of regional cultural identity in a multi-regional civilian parade *Reog* as a representation of the region within the Indonesian national stage, a function that ran parallel to its use as a medium for political mobilization at the local level, as previously described.

Escalation Leading Up to 1965 and the Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo National Congress

As the 1960s approached, tensions between *Reog* groups with different political affiliations intensified and escalated into actual physical clashes. Mbah Mulyadi recounted that a direct brawl once broke out between the BRP *Reog* troupe and the BREN group when they crossed paths in a procession an incident that illustrates the thin line between artistic performance and political mobilization in Ponorogo’s public sphere. This is corroborated by Supriyanto, who, citing elders as his source, stated that during the 1950s–1960s the situation was so unsafe that the *barong* performers were often equipped with sharp weapons; as with the previous account regarding “*mote*,” this information currently stands as a single testimony that has not yet been cross-checked with independent sources. He described that period as a time of competition among groups that invariably produced winners and losers, and not infrequently led to armed physical confrontations.

However, the dynamics of *Reog*’s political struggles were not uniform across all of Ponorogo. Bagong Siswanto, based on accounts from his elders, stated that in Tugurejo Village, some *Reog* figures were indeed part of Lekra, but the group continued to perform as they always had, without “*lelagon*” or politically charged songs hinting at specific affiliations. This reality demonstrates that the boundaries between political affiliation and performance practices do not always run parallel. The involvement of *Reog* artists in political networks does not necessarily coincide with the direct incorporation of political elements or changes to the performance’s aesthetics. In other words, performance expressions that point toward specific political affiliations cannot be generalized or considered uniform across the entire region.

The most concrete evidence of *Reog* artists’ involvement in politics is documented in video footage from the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), which records the gathering of the Barisan *Reog* Ponorogo (BRP) from across Indonesia in Madiun on

February 25–28, 1965. Here, a point of caution must be emphasized to avoid confusion: the location of this 1965 gathering happens to be the same as that of the 1948 Madiun Incident mentioned in Subsection A, but the two are entirely distinct events separated by seventeen years. Similarly, the institutional continuity between the BRP that emerged in 1948 and the BRP in 1965 has not been fully documented whether it was an unbroken, continuous organization or a revived name still needs to be verified, and for the time being should be treated as an open question, not as assumed continuity.



Figure 1. Musyawarah Besar Barisan Reog se-Indonesia Tahun 1965
Source: National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia

The 1965 meeting was no ordinary gathering, but rather a national congress attended by various *Reog* groups from several regions. The forum produced a number of political decisions: demands for the removal (retooling) of Adam Malik and Chairul Saleh, support for Indonesia's withdrawal from the UN, a demand for the death penalty for corrupt officials, support for arming workers and farmers, and support for the dissolution of the Sukarnoism Support Agency (BPS), the Islamic Students Association (HMI), and the Cultural Manifesto (Manikebu), along with organizations deemed politically ambiguous. Although the video does not explicitly mention party affiliations, this series of resolutions closely aligns with the agendas of Lekra and the PKI during the same period. The opening of the assembly even included a statement that explicitly positioned *Reog* as a battleground: “counter-revolutionary” forces could weaken the people’s fighting spirit through *Reog*, but a spirit of devotion to the homeland could also be fostered through *Reog*. This statement reflects the distinctive pattern of cultural mobilization characteristic of the Sukarno-era government, when traditional arts were treated as symbolic resources contested by various ideological forces.

Archival video documentation of the congress is supplemented by notes from Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri and Muhidin M. Dahlan, which indicate that although *Harian Rakjat*’s coverage of *Reog* was relatively sparse, the Ponorogo *Reog* Conference across Indonesia on February 25–28, 1965 attended by representatives from South Sumatra, West Java, and East Java, particularly Ponorogo was specifically reported on. It should be noted that what is available

for this study is Yuliantri and Dahlan's summary of that coverage, not direct access to the *Harian Rakjat* archives themselves; therefore, the alignment between those notes and the ANRI video recording is more accurately interpreted as corroborative consistency rather than full triangulation between two independent primary sources. In that forum, *Reog* was no longer treated merely as entertainment, but rather as a "political carnival in the streets" deemed capable of capturing the masses' attention; consequently, several of its resolutions called for enhancing the "ideological quality" of *Reog*. For Lekra East Java, the artistic quality of *Reog* Ponorogo was considered beyond question because it had become a time-honored tradition; the remaining task was to raise its ideological content so that *Reog* could become a leading weapon to "strike at the enemies of the People."

To that end, Lekra encouraged *Reog* groups in various regions to unite under a progressive-revolutionary organization modeling it after the All-Indonesia Ketoprak Contact Agency (Bakoksi) not by positioning itself as the direct unifier, but by mobilizing the *Reog* groups themselves to form a collective platform. Concerns about the erosion of the *Reog* tradition particularly in urban areas flooded with American and Indian films heightened this sense of urgency, with the fate of *Reog* likened to that of Lenong, which had been pushed to the outskirts of Jakarta. Based on the logic that *Reog* is the "biological child of the people's culture," whose development must serve the mother who gave birth to it, the 1965 deliberations produced resolutions that, artistically speaking, seemed unrelated to *Reog* but were ideologically intertwined while *Reog* took to the streets alongside other cultural militias to "crush" imperialist films from movie theaters. The close alignment between the resolutions recorded in the ANRI video archives and those documented in *Harian Rakjat* still provides a convincing foundation for the nature and content of that congress, subject to the methodological notes above.

E. A Parallel Facet: *Reog* as Folk Culture Beyond the Ideological Arena

However, politicization was not the only facet of *Reog* in the first half of the 1960s. At the same time, it continued to exist in parallel as a form of folk culture celebrated in the national media. The article "Gigi *Reog* Ponorogo" in the September 1963 issue of *Api Kartini* opens with admiration for the agility of the *pembarong* and the *dadak merak* figure, then shifts to its main focus the secret behind the dancers' strength in supporting the weight of the mask, which can reach around eighty kilograms, using only their teeth. By emphasizing "setting aside the issue of magic," the author who identifies as a nutritionist explains that this strength stems not from the supernatural but from the simple diet of the Ponorogo people: *tiwul* rice made from *gaplek*, bird's eye chili, *lamtoro*, bean sprouts, coconut milk-based *lompong*, salted fish, and *tempeh* a diet calculated to meet the approximate 4,500-calorie requirement for a *barong* performer. This framing deserves closer examination beyond mere culinary details: by deliberately setting aside the mystical framework and replacing it with calorie counts, this article situates the *warok*'s strength within a rational-scientific discourse aligned with the spirit of leftist development and modernization in the early 1960s a new form of legitimization for a tradition previously understood through the idiom of supernatural power. The presence of *Reog* Ponorogo in a left-leaning women's magazine like *Api Kartini* demonstrates that, beyond the arena of ideological struggle, it also circulated as an icon of cultural pride framed in popular and rational language a reminder that the meaning of *Reog* during this period was never singular.

The Dispute Over Testimonies: The *Penadon* Color Code and Recruitment Dynamics

According to Rido Kurnianto, based on his interviews with *Reog* elders who were living witnesses to the upheavals of that era, arts groups affiliated with Lekra initially appreciated *Reog* Ponorogo from the perspective of pure art. However, that approach was later drawn deep into the currents of politics and ideological conflict, giving rise to clashes among members of the community as well as conflicts with the authorities. On the other hand, the Nahdlatul Ulama arts group emerged as a counterbalancing force, causing *Reog* which had originally been a manifestation of cultural expression to shift into an arena of ideological conflict. After the PKI and all its affiliated organizations were dissolved, elements within *Reog* Ponorogo deemed communist were also “purged” in the sense that they were subjected to greater surveillance and control.

From Jenggo’s perspective the current chair of Lesbumi and according to the oral accounts of his elders, *Reog Cakra* failed to dominate the competition among party-affiliated *Reog* groups and thus sought an alternative path. Citing the account of Mbah Mujab Thahir, Arim Kamandaka stated that to overcome their disadvantage in the competition to attract audiences against BRP and BREN, *Reog Cakra* pioneered the use of female jathil dancers typically the daughters or daughters-in-law of the drum players and barong performers. The public’s response to this innovation was more positive, leading it to spread to other groups.

In addition, NU circles also developed the art of *gajah-gajahan* as a medium for mass mobilization with a more Islamic religious nuance, as well as a symbolic statement of their presence in Ponorogo’s cultural public sphere. It was this situation that prompted Lesbumi to become actively involved in the arts: not merely as a cultural preservator, but as a symbolic bulwark against ideological attacks from leftist groups. Lesbumi’s involvement in *Reog* Ponorogo, therefore, is not merely the product of an aesthetic passion, but rather part of a broader cultural strategy to maintain NU’s influence at the grassroots level.

One of the most instructive disputes over testimony in this section concerns the color codes of the *penadon*. Sunarso recorded a historical detail that, according to him, had not been documented in any *Reog* literature he had read: prior to 1965, the political affiliation of a *Reog* group could be directly discerned from the color of the *penadon* details accessories on the *warok*’s costume. He places this color code within a broader context namely, that since the pre-1960s era, the PKI, PNI, and Masyumi each sought to control *Reog* as a medium for mass mobilization, and the *penadon*’s color code was one of the most concrete manifestations of that process of political co-optation.

This claim must be weighed against Sarno’s differing testimony, in which he states that before 1965, the commonly worn *penadon* was plain black “just plain black” with no color distinctions between any groups. Sarno also recounted that some *Reog* artists were recruited into groups with specific ideologies through “sweet talk,” enticements with attractive promises, and not everyone who joined fully understood the ideological affiliations they were entering: some joined consciously, while others simply followed the crowd.

The discrepancy between Sunarso’s and Sarno’s accounts represents a methodological gap that needs to be resolved, not glossed over; one possible reconciliation is that the *penadon* color code is indeed practiced within *Reog* groups at the regency and city levels, while in rural communities such as the Sampung area the practice is either absent or unknown. Sarno’s testimony regarding “sweet talk” also serves as a reminder that recruitment does not always signify deep loyalty to the *paguron*; for the most part, it consists of patronage and persuasion, which complicates any explanation that relies too heavily on the teacher–student bond.

Purbo Sasongko emphasizes that by the eve of 1965, the BRP had significantly dominated the *Reog* Ponorogo ecosystem. However, he distinguishes between those involved solely out of loyalty to their *paguron* and those involved with conscious political intent for example, those

active as campaigners a gradation of ideological awareness that, in his view, also had different implications for each individual's fate after 1965. This distinction must be interpreted with the caution noted above: it may be an accurate description of the gradations of involvement at that time, but it may also partly reflect a post-tragedy construction of memory that tends to categorize victims into "those who were truly involved" and "those who merely followed their teacher."

From an aesthetic perspective, Purbo adds a detail that directly touches on the debate regarding the *penadon*: the plain black *penadon* is a distinctive original feature of Ponorogo, while the red stripe which has now become an iconic part of the *Reog* Ponorogo costume actually originated in Madiun and was introduced to Ponorogo in 1955 by a figure affiliated with the "red" faction (PKI/BRP). This information, if verified, actually provides a common ground for the Sunarso–Sarno dispute: the base color of the Ponorogo *penadon* is indeed plain black (in line with Sarno's view), while the red stripe is a later addition with political connotations (in line with the core of Sunarso's claim regarding color codes).

G30S/PKI and the Selective Depoliticization of *Reog* Ponorogo, 1965–1966

The G30S/PKI events of 1965 and the accompanying repression had a direct and dramatic impact on the *Reog* Ponorogo tradition. Deddy Satya Amidjaya explains that *Reog* groups affiliated with the BRP/PKI suffered the harshest blows: many members were hunted down, arrested, put on trial, or killed, causing these associations to disband one by one. As a result, *Reog* Ponorogo as a whole entered a state that he termed "suspended animation" until the late 1970s a void caused not only by the loss of its practitioners but also by the stigma that had taken root in society, equating the performance of *Reog* with sympathy for the Communist Party.

"Lull," however, is more accurately treated as a dominant narrative that is actually contradicted by a number of testimonies, rather than as a uniform picture. Not all *Reog* groups experienced a total vacuum after 1965. Jasmani, an elder of the Paguyuban *Reog Singo Manggolo Wirondaru* from Kalisat Village, Bungkal Subdistrict, explained that his group was actually founded on May 1, 1966 right in the middle of the period commonly referred to as "dormant" because the group had never been affiliated with the PKI and thus was not directly affected by the dissolution. This counterexample is significant: it demonstrates that the repercussions of 1965 operated selectively based on affiliation, rather than as a blanket eradication of the entire *Reog* tradition.

In his reflections on this period, Rido Kurnianto emphasized that the changes that occurred in *Reog* Ponorogo were "quite significant." The depoliticization of *Reog* from communist ideological influence was carried out systematically, in tandem with broader control over cultural expression by the new regime as it consolidated its power. That repressive atmosphere is also etched in Jenggo's memory; based on stories from previous generations, he recounts that *Reog* groups in Ponorogo were gripped by paralyzing fear: many were afraid to revive their traditions, afraid to perform, and afraid to move. All cultural expressions previously linked to the arena of ideological contestation either ceased or fell silent.

Between 1965 and 1966, Arim Kamandaka confirmed the state of limbo experienced by *Reog* groups and offered testimony from a more personal perspective: several of his own close family members were affected by the stigma associated with the PKI during this period. Anyone who had ever been associated even peripherally with PKI-affiliated organizations immediately faced the risk of social or physical punishment, and many artists found themselves in a vulnerable position due to their historical ties to Lekra and BRP. *Reog* groups that had previously been bustling suddenly fell silent.

Sarno offers perhaps the most poignant testimony regarding the psychological impact of 1965 on the *Reog* community. He noted that some artists stopped performing out of fear a trauma that, according to him, was still palpable even at the time of the interview: “Even now, those shadows are still there, sir.” Parents who had been affected passed that fear down to their children and grandchildren as a warning an intergenerational transmission of trauma that helped shape the *Reog* community’s collective memory of this period.

He described the years 1965–1966 as the hardest period: groups not associated with the PKI could still perform, but rarely, because the shadows of trauma still loomed large. Sarno’s account differs from academic narratives that often summarize this period as a uniform “void” or “suspended state”; he describes it as a suppressed existence *Reog* life still existed, but it unfolded amid constant fear. It is precisely this kind of testimony that enriches and at the same time corrects the “lull” category used by other sources.

Purbo Sasongko’s account of the impact of 1965 is the most personal among all the sources. His father who was affiliated with the PNI, not the PKI witnessed firsthand the massacres that took place that night: as dawn approached, the roar of vehicles could be heard, and residents worked together to dig mass graves. Purbo emphasizes that the victims were not only those who were consciously involved in politics, but also many artists wayang puppeteers and *Reog* performers who simply followed their *paguron* without any clear ideological understanding. It was here that loyalty to the *paguron* which, in the previous subsection, served as a mechanism for transmitting political affiliation turned into an existential threat: joining a group of teachers affiliated with the PKI, even without ideological awareness, became reason enough to be eliminated. This irony that obedience, not conviction, was what actually claimed victims became one of the darkest consequences of the politicized *paguron* structure.

The impact on the *Reog* tradition was devastating. Purbo described it as “extraordinary stagnation and emptiness,” as many artists who formed the backbone of the tradition including numerous Ponorogo puppeteers were also eliminated, either through physical execution or through fear that forced them to withdraw entirely from public life. On an aesthetic level, the aftermath of 1965 left a visually discernible mark: the red stripe that had previously adorned the *penadon* as a symbol of affiliation with the BRP/PKI vanished from the *Reog* Ponorogo costume. After 1965, the *penadon* returned to plain black a standard associated with Ponorogo’s authentic identity. The disappearance of this ornament was not merely an aesthetic change; it signaled that a phase of ideological-political identification in the history of *Reog* Ponorogo had come to an end, and that a new process of cultural identity reconstruction was beginning.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that between 1945 and 1966, *Reog* Ponorogo shifted from a village ritual arena to an instrument of political mobilization contested by various ideological forces, through the repurposing of the *paguron* structure the personal bond between teacher and student within the *warok* community from a mechanism of ritual devotion to a channel of political loyalty. This polarization manifested concretely in the symbolic markers of the performance: the musical repertoire and the color codes of the *penadon*, which, within the framework of Hobsbawm’s “invented tradition,” reveal how elements that appear to be authentic traditions were in fact reshaped for the sake of political legitimacy. The peak of this politicization was documented at the 1965 All-Indonesia *Reog* Ponorogo Association Conference in Madiun, before the G30S/PKI Incident dramatically yet selectively upended this landscape as illustrated by the counterexample of the establishment of the *Paguyuban Reog Singo Manggolo Wirondaru* on May 1, 1966.

Compared to Wilson's (1999) study, which focuses on spirituality and power relations within the *warok-gemblak* tradition, this article expands the historiographical understanding by emphasizing the explicit dimension of party-based political mobilization during the 1945–1966 period a dimension that has not been the primary focus of that study. This contribution, however, must be read with the methodological caution emphasized throughout the article: most of the data is derived from secondhand memories reconstructed six to eight decades after the events, and a number of key claims particularly details of physical violence and the use of weapons during performances still rely on single testimonies that require further triangulation with independent sources such as police archives or contemporary local press reports.

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