



Between Ritual and Market: The Dadak Merak and the Night Market Circuit in the Transformation of Reog Ponorogo, 1920–1940

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Abstract: Studies of the *dadak merak* have treated its visual form in isolation from the economics of performance, while studies of the social history of Reog Ponorogo have concentrated on the post independence period. This article aims to explain how the codification of the *dadak merak* and the circulation of Reog Ponorogo through the colonial night market circuit unfolded in Java between 1920 and 1940. Using the critical historical method (heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography), it reads together the documented stages of the form of the *dadak merak* (the 1920s, 1930, and 1939) and seven colonial press reports (1926–1940) on night markets (*pasar malam*) and charity fairs (*pasar derma*), supplemented by Pigeaud's ethnography and an interview with a heritage custodian. The results show that the *dadak merak* was standardised through small, cumulative decisions: the removal of the *jegol* around 1930, the addition of decorative elements, and the immobilisation of the *caplokan* in 1939. Over the same years, Reog Ponorogo moved from the charity fair at Tuban in 1926 to the Sriwedari pleasure garden in Solo and the fairs of Purwodadi and Tegal by the mid 1930s, listed alongside other hired entertainments. The rain summoning *barongan* Embah Dubruk shows that ritual use persisted alongside this commercial circulation. The article concludes that the two processes formed a single historical conjuncture rather than a causal chain, and that the commercialisation of Reog Ponorogo in this period did not amount to its secularisation.

Keywords: dadak merak; invented tradition; night markets; performance economy; Reog Ponorogo

Abstrak: Kajian tentang *dadak merak* selama ini memperlakukan bentuk visualnya secara terpisah dari ekonomi pertunjukan, sementara kajian sejarah sosial Reog Ponorogo terpusat pada periode pascakemerdekaan. Artikel ini bertujuan menjelaskan bagaimana kodifikasi bentuk *dadak merak* dan peredaran Reog Ponorogo dalam sirkuit pasar malam kolonial berlangsung di Jawa pada 1920–1940. Dengan metode sejarah kritis (heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi), artikel ini membaca secara bersamaan tahapan terdokumentasi bentuk *dadak merak* (dasawarsa 1920, 1930, dan 1939) dan tujuh laporan pers kolonial (1926–1940) tentang pasar malam dan pasar derma, dilengkapi etnografi Pigeaud serta wawancara dengan seorang pelestari pusaka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *dadak merak* dibakukan melalui keputusan-keputusan kecil yang kumulatif: penghapusan *jegol* sekitar 1930, penambahan unsur dekoratif, dan penghentian mekanisme gerak *caplokan* pada 1939. Pada rentang tahun yang sama, Reog Ponorogo bergerak dari pasar derma di Tuban pada 1926 ke taman hiburan Sriwedari di Solo serta pasar malam di Purwodadi dan Tegal pada pertengahan 1930, tercatat sejajar dengan hiburan sewaan lainnya. Kasus *barongan* Embah Dubruk yang dipakai dalam ritual memanggil hujan menunjukkan bahwa fungsi ritual tetap bertahan berdampingan dengan peredaran komersial tersebut. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa kedua proses itu membentuk satu konjungtur historis, bukan rantai sebab akibat, dan bahwa komersialisasi Reog Ponorogo pada periode ini tidak identik dengan sekularisasinya.

Kata Kunci: dadak merak; ekonomi pertunjukan; pasar malam kolonial; Reog Ponorogo; tradisi ciptaan.



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Introduction

The term *reog* has never designated a single art form. It is dispersed across Java, marking a number of folk performances whose forms and meanings differ appreciably from one another. In West Java there is Reog Sunda, or *reog dogdog*, which knows neither the large mask nor the magical elements characteristic of Reog Ponorogo, combining instead dance, song, comic repartee, and social criticism to the accompaniment of a set of *dogdog* drums of varying sizes (Kautsar, 2020). In Central Java, in the village of Kalikebo, Trucuk District, Klaten Regency, there survives Seni Naluri Reog Brijo Lor, a village cleansing (*bersih dusun*) tradition performed by such figures as mounted soldiers, shield bearers, *jebeng*, *penthul*, and *tembem* (Faizin, 2019; Rumbiyardi, 2013). Even within East Java the name *reog* attaches to more than Ponorogo alone: Reog Cemandi in Sidoarjo employs a *barongan* mask and drums but no *dadak merak*; Reog Kendang is found in Tulungagung; and Reog Bulkiyo in Blitar is associated with remnants of Prince Diponegoro's troops (Dwiyani, 2017; Nugraheni, 2018; Santoso, 2016). This distribution makes clear that *reog* is more accurately understood as a shared name sheltering a diversity of folk arts than as a single form originating in one place.

The present article confines itself to one variant within that distribution, Reog Ponorogo, and specifically to the final two decades of Netherlands Indies colonial rule, from 1920 to 1940. This periodisation is not an administrative convenience. It is for these two decades that two kinds of documentary trace are available which can rarely be set side by side for earlier phases of Reog Ponorogo: on the one hand, staged documentation of change in the physical form of the *dadak merak*, the most conspicuous visual element of the performance; and on the other, contemporaneous colonial press notices recording the recurrent presence of Reog Ponorogo in the circuit of night markets and charity fairs across East and Central Java. The conjunction of these two source types constitutes the point of departure for this article and distinguishes it from earlier scholarship.

The scholarship relevant to this article may be mapped into three clusters. The first comprises formal visual studies of the *dadak merak*, represented by Wijayanto et al. (2024) and Naufal et al. (2024), which document the successive stages of the form in detail but do not connect those stages to the socio economic context obtaining off stage during the same period. The second comprises socio political studies of Reog, represented by Mukarromah and Devi (2012) on party mass mobilisation through Reog performance in Ponorogo between 1950 and 1980, and, more recently, by a study of the *paguron* network of Reog as political infrastructure between 1945 and 1966 (Ardyasworo et al., 2026). These studies are strong in accounting for the political instrumentalisation of Reog, but their periodisation does not extend into the colonial era, precisely when the pattern of performance as commodity first took shape. The third cluster comprises ethnographic studies of colonial folk performance, represented by Th. Pigeaud's *Javaanse Volksvertoningen* (Pigeaud, 1938, p. 186), a descriptive and valuable contemporaneous source that is nonetheless focused neither on Reog Ponorogo in particular nor on its patterns of circulation through the night markets. These three clusters have never been brought into direct conversation; no study has yet combined formal visual data with data on the economic circulation of performance recorded in the colonial press in order to show that the two processes ran concurrently and may be read as elements of a single historical conjuncture.

Although each of these three clusters makes an important contribution, each still apprehends the transformation of Reog Ponorogo only in part. The visual studies stop at the evolution of form, while the socio political studies begin only in the post independence period. As a consequence, it remains unknown how visual change in the *dadak merak* proceeded alongside the expansion of the performance economy in the late colonial period. Studies of colonial fairs, for their part, have examined Pasar Gambir and the annual fairs of the Netherlands Indies as sites of colonial spectacle, consumerism, and early cinema going (Asmira, 2022; Ruppin, 2017; van der Meer, 2017), but have not followed the folk performances that filled their programmes.

The research problem addressed by this article is therefore how the visual transformation of Reog Ponorogo and its entry into the colonial performance economy were related in the final two decades of Dutch rule. Three questions follow from it: (1) how the form of the *dadak merak* was codified between the 1920s and 1939; (2) how Reog Ponorogo came to circulate through the night markets and charity fairs of East and Central Java between 1926 and 1940; and (3) whether this commercial circulation displaced the ritual function of Reog or coexisted with it. Accordingly, the article aims to reconstruct the stages of codification of the *dadak merak*, to trace the presence of Reog Ponorogo in the colonial night market circuit as recorded in the contemporaneous press, and to assess the relationship between these two processes and the persistence of ritual use within a single historical conjuncture.

In answering these questions, and at the intersection of the three lacunae identified above, the present article advances the following argument. The codification of the form of the *dadak merak* between 1920 and 1939 unfolded during the same span of years as the consolidation of Reog Ponorogo as a fixed component of the colonial night market entertainment ecology, from the charity fair at Tuban in the mid 1920s to the charity fairs of various Central Javanese towns in the late 1930s (Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, 1940, September 27; De Locomotief, 1926, September 14). So far as the available sources permit reconstruction, these two processes proceeded as a single historical conjuncture: an intersection between the standardisation of visual form and the consolidation of the economic circulation of performance, rather than two processes that merely happened to coincide without relation of any kind. It must be stressed at the outset, however, and this constitutes an important limit distinguishing this article from more ambitious claims, that the available sources permit a reading of the correlation between the two processes, not a demonstration of linear causation. The colonial press recorded the presence of performances, not the motives behind changes in their form; the academic articles documenting the evolution of the *dadak merak* do not explain why those changes occurred at particular moments. To link the two as direct causation would exceed what the extant evidence can sustain.

To read these two bodies of evidence together, this article draws on three concepts, each used within defined limits. The first is Sahlins's notion of the structure of the conjuncture, understood as the set of historical relationships that at once reproduce existing cultural categories and give them new values in a pragmatic context (Sahlins, 1981, pp. 33, 35–38). The concept makes it possible to treat the codification of the *dadak merak* and the consolidation of the night market circuit as two sequences unfolding within one historical moment, without assigning to either the role of prime mover. The second is Hobsbawm's notion of invented tradition, a set of practices that seek to inculcate certain values and norms by repetition and thereby imply continuity with the past (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp. 1–4). It is used here narrowly, to read the standardisation of the *dadak merak* as incremental codification rather than as deliberate invention by a single authority. The third is Storey's understanding of popular culture as culture produced for and consumed within a market, yet remaining a site in which meanings are

negotiated rather than simply imposed (Storey, 2018, pp. 8–9, 11–12). This concept allows the position of Reog within the night market circuit to be read as that of an entertainment commodity hired and paid for, without reducing it to mere merchandise, since its ritual function continued to operate in parallel. Taken together, the three concepts define the perspective of this article: form, circulation, and ritual persistence are treated as simultaneous processes within a single conjuncture, and the relationship between them as a correlation to be demonstrated from the sources rather than a causation to be assumed.

Having set out the research problem, the objectives, and the theoretical framework, the significance and contribution of this article can now be stated, and they must be formulated with care. First, it juxtaposes two corpora, visual documentation of the *dadak merak* and press notices of the night markets, which two distinct scholarly traditions have hitherto read in isolation from one another. Second, it demonstrates that the transformation of Reog Ponorogo in this period did not proceed as a one directional passage from ritual to entertainment, as popular narratives frequently presume. The account of the old *barongan* named Embah Dubruk, which according to testimony gathered from a heritage custodian functioned as a ritual intermediary for summoning rain (B. Mariono, personal communication, April 3, 2026), shows that the ritual function did not disappear as the commercial function strengthened, but rather persisted alongside it. Third, and this is equally important to state in advance, the article deliberately refrains from addressing the question of visual change in the *jathil*, *warok*, or *bujang ganong* over the same period, or of government level colonial policy (*Koloniaal Verslag, Memorie van Overgave*) referring specifically to Reog Ponorogo between 1920 and 1940. The absence of documentation on both counts within the corpus available at the time of writing makes it more appropriate to set them out as an agenda for further research than to force them into the principal argument.

Research Methods

This article has been composed by means of the critical historical method: heuristics, source criticism (both external and internal), interpretation, and historiography, with emphasis throughout on caution regarding the limitations of colonial sources. Two corpora furnish its principal support. The first consists of seven contemporaneous colonial press reports containing explicit mention of "rejog" or "Reog Ponorogo" in the context of folk performance: *De Locomotief* (14 September 1926; 11 January 1934; 19 October 1934), *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië* (19 September 1934; 2 September 1935), *De Indische Courant* (30 September 1936; 4 January 1938), and *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (27 September 1940) (*Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië*, 1934, 1935; *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1940; *De Indische Courant*, 1936, 1938; *De Locomotief*, 1926, 1934a, 1934b). These reports were selected because they satisfy three criteria: they mention Reog explicitly, they carry unambiguous dates, and they fall within the temporal range of the study (1920–1940). The second corpus consists of two scholarly articles documenting the successive stages of the *dadak merak* on the basis of visual sources: Wijayanto et al. (2024) and Naufal et al. (2024), both of which serve here as academic secondary sources, since this research did not itself consult the photographic collections or material objects on which those articles rest (Naufal et al., 2024, pp. 194–204; Wijayanto et al., 2024, pp. 90–100). Supplementing these are the contemporaneous ethnographic work of Th. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen* (1938), and a single item of interview testimony from a heritage custodian, Budi Mariono, concerning the ritual function of the old *barongan* Embah Dubruk (Pigeaud, 1938, p. 186; B. Mariono, personal communication, April 3, 2026).

Each press report has been examined with respect to its publisher, its date, and its context of publication, rather than treated as a neutral record. *De Locomotief* and *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië* were Dutch language newspapers addressed to European readers and to the educated indigenous public of the Netherlands Indies; both reported night markets and charity fairs as items of municipal news or philanthropic activity, not as ethnographic coverage of folk art. Mentions of "rejog" in these sources accordingly appear as entries in lists of attractions rather than as descriptions elucidating the form, performers, or meaning of the performance itself. These sources therefore establish the presence of a performance at a given date and place; they do not establish its degree of popularity, still less the character of its reception. Internal criticism is required above all to address ambiguity of nomenclature: the report in *De Indische Courant* of 30 September 1936 on the daily attractions of an exhibition lists "*rejog Pajaman*", not "*rejog Ponorogo*" (De Indische Courant, 1936, September 30), a reminder that in this period the name "rejog" sheltered performance forms of various regional provenance, so that not every occurrence of "rejog" in a colonial source may be identified straightforwardly with Reog Ponorogo.

The same internal criticism has been applied to the two scholarly articles that supply the visual data. Because this research did not directly verify the photographs or objects to which Wijayanto et al. and Naufal et al. refer, the three stages of the *dadak merak* are treated as findings inherited from those articles rather than as the product of the present author's primary examination. In the same way, the interview testimony of Budi Mariono concerning Embah Dubruk is treated as reconstructed community memory, adduced to demonstrate that the ritual function existed rather than to establish the details of its practice in any particular colonial decade. In view of these limitations, the article opts for a correlative rather than a causal reading of the two corpora. At the interpretation stage, the concepts of the structure of the conjuncture, invented tradition, and popular culture outlined in the Introduction are used to read the two corpora together, without claiming that either process caused the other. The limitations of colonial sources are affirmed as a methodological principle: the contemporaneous press and ethnographic reports were composed to serve colonial administration and colonial readers, not to record indigenous perspectives. This article therefore states explicitly, in each section, which areas may be claimed with confidence and which still require further verification, above all the government level colonial administrative archive and visual documentation of the *jathil*, *warok*, and *bujang ganong*, both of which lie beyond the reach of the present corpus.

Research Results

Codification of the Form of the *Dadak Merak*, 1920–1939

For the period before the 1920s the present corpus contains no documented visual description of the form of Reog Ponorogo. The available narratives concerning the art's early phases, including the story of Ki Ageng Kutu as its originating figure in the closing years of Majapahit (Sugianto, 2020, p. 4), are legendary in character and explain the reasons for its creation rather than the appearance of what was created. Photographs and notices from the 1920s are consequently treated here as a point of departure for observation, not as the terminal stage of a long evolution that might be reconstructed in full. The earliest depiction of the physical form of Reog Ponorogo traceable through visual documentation derives from photographs of the 1920s. At that time the *dadak merak* was of far simpler construction than the form known today. The performance was still enacted by two men who together animated the figure of a four legged tiger: a *pembarong* in front and, behind him, a performer known as the *jegol*, who took the part of the animal's hind legs (Wijayanto et al., 2024, pp. 90–95). The *caplokan*, or tiger's head, could be moved up and down, producing a repeated clacking sound.

The tiger mask at this stage remained very plain and was not furnished with hair, unlike the form that developed subsequently. The *rengkek*, the arrangement of peacock feathers, was likewise still sparse, set out in a semicircle roughly one metre in diameter and finished with three layers of decorative cloth identifiable in retrospect as an early form of the *krakab*. The covering cloth known as the *keruduk* was made to extend some two to two and a half metres to the rear, serving to conceal the *jegol* and to represent the tiger's body as a complete quadruped.

The first recorded change occurred around 1930. The *jegol* was eliminated at this point, his role having come to be regarded as of insufficient significance within the performance, a decision which, although the reasoning behind it is not recorded in detail in the available sources, marks a shift away from a two performer choreography that literally imitated the movement of a four legged animal towards a more compact form. The *dadak merak* at this stage was not yet especially large, standing at about one and a half metres, with peacock ornamentation more neatly arranged but still incomplete in the absence of the *cohong*, an accessory of velvet decorated with peacock shaped beadwork. This movement towards a more finished form was accompanied by a more distinctive model of tiger mask: fanged, roaring, and more realistically leonine in appearance (Naufal et al., 2024, pp. 196–198). Visually, the addition of a peacock body begins to appear at this stage, reinforcing the aesthetic effect of the peacock's tail, which had previously merely extended from the semicircular *rengkek*. Beneath the *caplokan*, a semicircular cloth ornament worked with red and yellow thread, now termed the *embong*, likewise began to be added, together with a shawl (*selendang*) laid over the *krakab*.

The third documented stage falls in 1939, and it is at this point that the changes evince a far more mature aesthetic consciousness than at either of the two preceding stages. The *caplokan* could no longer be moved: the mechanical device characteristic of the 1920s stage was abandoned entirely. The tiger's face underwent deliberate deformation: the frontal aspect was flattened, with a wide mouth and fangs recalling the Butha Kala figure in the *kayon* of *wayang kulit*, while the tiger's hair, absent at the first stage, began to appear, creating the impression that the Singa Barong was an antagonist (Naufal et al., 2024, pp. 199–201). On the *rengkek*, the peacock feathers began to be extended at the tail in a denser arrangement, and the *krakab* was made complete, with rolled cloth ornament. This process unfolded under conditions that were not politically free: Reog performances in this period remained under the surveillance of a colonial government apprehensive of their potential as a medium of mass mobilisation, an apprehension which, as will be discussed further below, is documented in general terms but not in the form of a specific policy naming Reog Ponorogo explicitly during this period.

Read in sequence, these three stages disclose a pattern that is not a single leap from a "primitive" to a "mature" form, but rather a series of small and cumulative decisions: the removal of an element deemed no longer functional (the *jegol*), the addition of decorative elements strengthening aesthetic effect (the peacock body, the *embong*, the *selendang*), and, at the final stage, a more radical decision: the abandonment of the mask's moving mechanism in favour of a fixed and narrative visual character. It is this pattern that may be read, within Hobsbawm's framework, as a process of invented tradition in the precise sense: not creation at a stroke, but incremental standardisation that eventually yields a form which appears, to subsequent generations, always to have been thus (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp. 1–4).

This sequence of changes indicates that the visual codification of the *dadak merak* did not proceed as an autonomous artistic evolution, but rather as an incremental selection among forms deemed most effective aesthetically and most apt representationally. The visual standardisation that emerged in the late 1930s may accordingly be understood as the accumulated outcome of small decisions at once practical and symbolic. This reading converges with Wijayanto et al. (2024), who, following the form of the *dadak merak* into the 1990s, relate

its successive changes to the social, political, and economic conditions of the Ponorogo community rather than to purely artistic development. The same logic of selection has continued into the present: the festival format of Reyog Ponorogo has privileged innovation in choreography, costume, and staging, while the older *obyog* format has retained direct interaction with audiences and elements of ritual (Nursilah et al., 2026; Renza et al., 2024).

The Night Market as an Ecology of Performance Economy

If change in the form of the *dadak merak* discloses a process of visual standardisation internal to the art itself, the second corpus reveals a process external to it: the manner in which Reog Ponorogo, over the same span of years, became ever more firmly established as a fixed component of the colonial night market entertainment circuit. In this period Reog Ponorogo gained popularity as a performing art across a range of regions and indeed became a source of income for its performers. They appeared at night markets and annual fairs, frequently engaged by municipal councils or organising committees for evening entertainment. Such fairs were themselves a colonial institution of some importance: from the early twentieth century, annual fairs and events of the Pasar Gambir type functioned as spaces in which colonial modernity was staged and consumed, and in which colonised performers took part as paid participants as well as objects of display (Asmira, 2022; van der Meer, 2017). The institution itself was of long standing: pasar malam had been held annually in many localities since the early nineteenth century, and in the final decades of Dutch rule numerous small pasar malam were organised as fundraisers for charitable causes (Horton, 2025). In his contemporaneous ethnographic work, Pigeaud notes that Reog also performed in wedding and circumcision processions, and that its performers were commonly hired by prosperous farmers for a fee that was substantial for the time: some twenty to twenty five guilders. Reog likewise took part in the *unggah kaji* procession, accompanying prospective pilgrims departing for Mecca (Pigeaud, 1938, pp. 186–187).

Pigeaud's account is general in character and not precisely dated, but it can be specified and dated through contemporaneous textual evidence dispersed through the colonial press. The report in *De Locomotief* of 14 September 1926 covers a night market at Tuban, held from 29 August to 5 September in celebration of the King's birthday and devoted to charitable purposes. In the list of performances offered to visitors, "rejog" appears alongside *wayang*, *srimpi*, wrestling, *rodat*, *ludruk*, and *sandur* (De Locomotief, 1926, September 14). This notice pushes the evidentiary threshold for the diffusion of *rejog* in the colonial night market back to an earlier point, the mid 1920s on the north coast of East Java, a moment corresponding, according to the first corpus, to the period in which the form of the *dadak merak* was still at its simplest.

Eight years later, the Solo municipal listings in *De Locomotief* of 11 January 1934 include *rejog* Ponorogo among the items in the evening programme continuing the Maleman festivities at Taman Sriwedari, alongside *wayang orang*, *ketoprak*, *pencak* from Cikawao, and a theatrical performance by the "Frankier" troupe from Surabaya (De Locomotief, 1934a, January 11). This notice registers an important shift: by the early 1930s Reog Ponorogo was no longer confined to charity night markets of the Tuban type but had also entered Sriwedari, the pleasure garden of the Surakarta Sunanate and one of the foremost stages for the performing arts in Central Java at that time. This entry coincided with the commercialisation of Sriwedari itself, which between 1910 and 1939 was transformed from a royal garden laden with sacred values into an urban entertainment venue combining wayang performances, cinema, a zoo, and a stadium (Indriyani, 2025).

This geographical shift continued within the same year. The report in *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië* of 19 September 1934 on the first Pasar Malem

Purwodadian, a charity fair at Purwodadi, Grobogan Regency, whose proceeds were directed in part towards the acquisition of an X-ray installation for the local hospital, lists rejog Ponorogo among the entertainments customarily present at every charity fair, alongside *wayang*, *ketoprak*, and *doger* from Bandung (*Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië*, 1934, September 19). This account is corroborated by an independent source: the report in *De Locomotief* of 19 October 1934 on the same Pasar Malem Purwodadi notices comparable events (*De Locomotief*, 1934b, October 19). Two distinct contemporaneous press sources thus reinforce one another, a corroboration which, it must be noted with care, confirms the presence of the performance rather than its degree of popularity or its continuity from year to year.

The geographical range of rejog Ponorogo within this circuit becomes still more apparent in the following year. The programme of the Pasar Malam Alhambra at Tegal, published in *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië* of 2 September 1935, lists rejog Ponorogo alongside *ketoprak*, *pencak*, *doger* from the Priangan, *wayang cokek gambang kromong* from Batavia, and the Balinese *legong* and *gandrung* dances (*Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië*, 1935, September 2). Its inclusion indicates that by the mid 1930s Reog Ponorogo was being staged far beyond its region of origin, having entered a colonial night market entertainment circuit that reached the towns of the north coast of Central Java.

Two sources from the second half of the 1930s demand caution with respect to nomenclature. The report in *De Indische Courant* of 30 September 1936 on the daily attractions of an exhibition presents a list of performances comprising Kodok Ngorèk, the *ketoprak* troupe "Darmo Tjaritó", *wayang orang*, the *ludruk* of Doelrasim, Madurese *roending*, and "rejog Pajaman", not "rejog Ponorogo" (*De Indische Courant*, 1936, September 30). The next source, *De Indische Courant* of 4 January 1938, reports the programme of festivities arranged by the Oranje Comité at Nganjuk, which included a variety of folk performances, among them rejog and *ludruk*, staged in the town square (*De Indische Courant*, 1938, January 4). As with the entry for "rejog Pajaman", this notice is terse and establishes only the presence of a performance within a series of events, without any certainty as to whether Reog Ponorogo or some other regional form of rejog was intended.

Comparable traces still appear towards the close of the colonial era. *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* of 27 September 1940 reports plans for a Pasar Derma on the regency grounds, the entire proceeds of which were to be donated to the local branch of the S.C.V.T., with performances of rejog and *stamboel* among the scheduled attractions (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1940, September 27). Scattered though they are, the findings from 1926 to 1940 cumulatively disclose one consistent pattern: throughout the final two decades of colonial rule, rejog (and, in several notices, Reog Ponorogo explicitly) had become a fixed component of the night market and charity fair entertainment ecology extending from East Java into Central Java. Read together, these seven sources show that the presence of Reog did not stand alone as a singular attraction but figured as one entry within a broader list of entertainments, a parity indicating that by this period Reog was being treated as an entertainment commodity of a status equivalent to that of other entertainment forms, whether modern or traditional (Storey, 2018, pp. 6–8), and indicating further that by the mid 1930s Reog Ponorogo had passed beyond the boundaries of its regency of origin to circulate within an interregional network of night markets. This parity is consistent with what is known of the programmes of colonial fairs more broadly, in which older performance forms were staged beside *stamboel*, the commercial Indies theatre that had flourished in Javanese towns since the turn of the century, and beside moving pictures, a regular fixture of *pasar malam* entertainment from 1905 onwards (Amin et al., 2024; Ruppín, 2017).

Correlation, Not Causation: Reading the Two Corpora Together

The two corpora set out above, the codification of the form of the *dadak merak* and the consolidation of the night market circuit, occupy strikingly the same span of years. The first point of visual documentation for the *dadak merak*, the 1920s, corresponds to the first point of press documentation for the presence of rejog at the Tuban night market in 1926. The second stage of visual codification, around 1930, narrowly precedes the sequence of press reports from Solo, Purwodadi, and Tegal concentrated between 1934 and 1935. The third and most significant stage of visual codification, in 1939, falls not long before the final report in this corpus, *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* of 1940, on the eve of the close of the colonial period brought about by the Japanese occupation.

This temporal correspondence is tempting to read as a relation of cause and effect. That temptation must be refused explicitly here. Not one source in either corpus asserts any such relation: the press reports merely record the presence of a performance at a given date and place, saying nothing of the form of *dadak merak* staged at each event, still less of the reasons behind changes in that form; conversely, the two scholarly articles from which the visual stages are drawn do not address the night market context at all. To claim causation between them would be to stitch two independent bodies of data into a single narrative unsupported by direct evidence.

What the extant evidence can sustain is a more modest reading: that these two processes unfolded within one and the same historical moment, the final two decades of Dutch colonialism in Java. Sahlins's framework of the structure of the conjuncture is pertinent at this juncture, offering a way of reading two sequences of events as parts of a single historical order without imposing upon either the role of prime mover and upon the other that of consequence (Sahlins, 1981, pp. 33, 35–38). To convert this correlative reading into a defensible causal claim would require sources currently beyond the corpus of this research, for instance, records from contemporaneous craftsmen or Reog associations, or colonial administrative reports registering specific policy towards Reog Ponorogo during this period. Until such sources are located or verified, this article elects to state the correlation as its finding and to consign the question of causation to an agenda for further research.

The Coexistence of Ritual and Commercial Functions

One premise that may arise in popular narratives about Reog in this period presupposes a transition from ritual to popular entertainment, as though these two functions occupied successive positions on a single timeline. The discussion of the night market circuit above has shown with reasonable conviction that the commercial function of Reog Ponorogo was already well established by the mid 1920s. Nevertheless, one item of testimony within the present corpus requires that the premise of a one directional transition be corrected.

Budi Mariono, in testimony gathered by the author, states that according to accounts he has collected from village elders there existed an old *barongan* named Embah Dubruk which functioned as a ritual intermediary for summoning rain during prolonged dry seasons (B. Mariono, personal communication, April 3, 2026). This testimony constitutes community memory reconstructed through oral accounts transmitted across generations, not a contemporaneous written record from the years 1920 to 1940. What may be drawn from it, with a degree of confidence proportionate to the nature of the source, is that the ritual function of Reog persisted as part of the belief system of the Ponorogo community, independently of and un supplanted by the strengthening commercial function recorded in the colonial press over the same period.

This duality, between a *barongan* hired to perform at night markets for a fee in guilders and another *barongan* safeguarded as a ritual intermediary that is not bought or sold, indicates that Reog Ponorogo between 1920 and 1940 was not a single entity migrating from one function to another, but an art form accommodating more than one register of meaning at once. This dual function renders Reog a cultural entity more complex than any linear evolutionary narrative of the "from ritual to popular entertainment" type can capture. One qualifying note must be added: because the testimony concerning Embah Dubruk derives from a single interview source, it cannot be generalised into a claim that all or most *barongan* of Reog Ponorogo in this period preserved a comparable ritual function. The coexistence of the two functions nonetheless demonstrates that commercialisation is not identical with secularisation. In the case of Reog Ponorogo, the logic of the market and the logic of ritual operated in parallel upon the same cultural object. Comparable coexistence has been documented in recent studies of related Javanese performance traditions: *kuda lumping* staged as a scheduled tourist attraction has retained its opening rites and trance (Yuniastoeti & Gitasiswhara, 2026), and in Ponorogo itself the *obyog* format of Reyog continues to preserve ritual elements alongside the commercialised festival format (Nursilah et al., 2026). Later evidence, beyond the scope of this article, suggests that such layering proved durable: the revival of *penadhon*, the costume associated with the *warok*, has been driven at once by veneration of the *warok* and by performances and wholesale trade in the costume (Madani et al., 2026), while after independence Reog was modified to convey Islamic values as part of efforts to displace the *gemblak* tradition (Krismawati et al., 2018).

Colonial Surveillance: A Delimited Argument

A premise commonly encountered in popular narratives about Reog under colonial rule holds that the Netherlands Indies government actively monitored and restricted the art on account of its potential as an instrument of mass mobilisation. The premise has a foundation, but that foundation requires careful examination if it is not to be extended beyond what is genuinely demonstrable for the years 1920 to 1940 specifically. Colonial apprehension about Reog as a social network capable of mobilising crowds is indeed documented; yet the sources supporting it speak for the most part about structural conditions that had taken shape well before 1920, namely, the void of Surakarta court patronage for Reog after 1755, which deepened further following the Diponegoro War of 1825–1830 (Onghokham, 2018, pp. 36–37, 46). It was within that void that the colonial government encountered Reog as a communal practice already deeply rooted in the absence of state cultivation or regulation (Mukarromah & Devi, 2012, pp. 65–67). This is an argument about general conditions spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not a dated policy directed specifically at the years 1920 to 1940.

For the period on which this article focuses, the only available indication is the observation that the codification of the form of the *dadak merak* in 1939 "unfolded under politically constrained conditions", with Reog performances "still under surveillance" by the colonial government (Naufal et al., 2024, pp. 200–201). This observation is terse and unaccompanied by reference to any particular policy document, so that the claim of surveillance for the year 1939 must be treated as an observation requiring further verification rather than as an established fact. By way of comparison beyond the temporal bounds of this article, it may be noted that during the Japanese occupation, in 1942, Reog associations and activities are reported to have declined because the occupying government prohibited arts associations feared capable of mobilising crowds (Mukarromah & Devi, 2012, pp. 66–67). Recent studies qualify this picture: the occupation authorities channelled artistic life through the Keimin Bunka Shidosho, prohibiting, for instance, the improvised dialogue of sandiwara in order to prevent

criticism of Japan (Masriyani & Azizah, 2025), while at the same time sponsoring pasar malam across Java at which ketoprak, wayang, and other folk performances continued to be staged (Horton, 2025). What the occupation targeted, in other words, appears to have been uncontrolled association rather than folk performance as such. This explicit policy of prohibition is documented far more firmly than anything available for the Dutch colonial period between 1920 and 1940, a disparity indicating that explicit and documented surveillance of Reog as a mobilisational threat becomes genuinely evident only under the Japanese occupation. The mobilisational potential that colonial and occupation authorities are said to have feared was realised openly only after independence, when the *paguron* network of Reog became political infrastructure for competing parties between 1945 and 1966 (Ardyasworo et al., 2026; Mukarromah & Devi, 2012).

The argument concerning colonial surveillance in this article is accordingly delimited to two defensible statements: first, that the structural condition of an absence of state patronage and cultivation of Reog had taken shape before 1920 and in all likelihood continued into the period under discussion; and second, that there exists a single terse observation of surveillance in 1939 which has not yet been verifiable against primary policy documents. Beyond these two statements, this article makes no claim to knowledge of the specific form, intensity, or mechanism of colonial surveillance over Reog Ponorogo between 1920 and 1940, and consigns that question to an agenda for further research requiring access to the government level colonial administrative archive.

Conclusion

This article has advanced a reading of Reog Ponorogo in the period 1920–1940 resting upon two corpora that have hitherto rarely been set side by side: staged documentation of the codification of the form of the *dadak merak*, and contemporaneous colonial press notices of the consolidation of the night market circuit. Both processes occurred within the same span of years, but the available sources permit only a reading of the temporal correlation between them, not of direct causation, a limit deliberately maintained throughout this article so that every claim rests upon evidence that genuinely exists rather than upon inference exceeding the data.

Within that frame, the transformation of Reog Ponorogo in this period is most accurately understood as a historical conjuncture: the visual standardisation of the *dadak merak*, proceeding through a series of small and cumulative decisions, converging with the consolidation of Reog as an entertainment commodity circulating widely through the night market and charity fair circuit from East Java into Central Java. At the same time, the testimony concerning the *barongan* Embah Dubruk shows that this strengthening of the commercial function did not displace the ritual function of Reog but proceeded alongside it, a coexistence that corrects the premise of a one directional transition "from ritual to popular entertainment" so often presumed in popular narratives about this art.

This article has also deliberately withheld two claims that the available corpus cannot sustain: visual change in the *jathil*, *warok*, and *bujang ganong* over the same period, and government level colonial policy explicitly directed at Reog Ponorogo between 1920 and 1940. Reog Ponorogo in the years 1920 to 1940 appears as an art form negotiating more than one demand at once: the demands of stage aesthetics, of the commercial entertainment market, and of an older local belief system, with no single one of those demands entirely overcoming the others.

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