

SASAK PUPPETRY, DETRADITIONALIZATION, AND CULTURAL POLICY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY ANALYSIS

Ahmad Zamzuri^{1*}, Tirta Suwondo, Dessy Wahyuni¹, Yohanes Adhi Satiyoko¹,
Nurweni Saptawuryandari¹, and Abdul Latief Apriaman²

¹ National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia

² Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Nahdlatul Ulama University, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Ahmad Zamzuri
ahmad.zamzuri@brin.go.id

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The Sasak shadow puppetry tradition, or *wayang Sasak*, from the Lombok Island of West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, stories derive from *Serat Menak*. Sasak shadow puppetry, in contrast to wayang in other parts of Indonesia, is stagnating and faces potential erosion in modern performances. This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to the slow development of *wayang Sasak*. The study gathered data from a sample of 18 participants using a combination of ethnographic techniques and semi-structured interviews. The research focused on the historical, philosophical, functional, and developmental aspects of Sasak shadow puppetry in relation to digital technology, fashion, tourism, and cultural policy. The study applied an interpretative phenomenological analysis method based on a phenomenological hermeneutic approach to explore and interpret the results from the interviews. The research found that a non-governmental organisation, *Sekolah Pedalangan Wayang Sasak* (SPWS), has proposed an innovative program for developing Sasak puppetry using AI, bottles, and puppets, along with regular guidance, to improve children's understanding of puppets. This study also identified significant factors that have impeded the progress of Sasak puppetry. First, there is a lack, if not an absence, of reliable written references to the history and sources of Sasak puppet stories. Additionally, the older and younger generations have not yet reached agreement on modernizing Sasak puppetry and the Sasak puppet actors, puppeteers, musicians, and leather workers face a challenging situation, including issues with funding, the availability of cow leather for puppet making, and the need for regeneration among puppeteers and crafters. Local and central government policies, as well as cultural policies, have not had an impact on maximizing the potential of Sasak puppetry. These findings require further action by all parties to develop Sasak puppets for local and global recognition.

Keywords: Sasak puppet; cultural detraditionalization; cultural policy; interpretative phenomenology; cultural development

1. INTRODUCTION

This research began with the question of how sustainable Sasak puppetry is in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Other regions have often posed similar questions about their traditional cultures (Ratchatakorntakoon, 2024). Sasak puppetry, especially Lalu Nasib's 1970s performances, have proven capable of finding strong popularity among young people. The incorporation of a comical approach into his *wayang pop* concept successfully captured the attention of the youth, enticing them to attend Sasak puppet performances. Some perceived Lalu Nasib's puppet show as a violation of the *pakem*, the major guidelines governing puppet shows, while others viewed it as a form of artistic creativity (Harnish, 2003). Through that style, Lalu Nasib introduced a financially lucrative style of shadow puppet performance, that generated a minimum of 200–300 dollars per performance during that period.

The popularity of Sasak puppet literary performances declined at the turn of the century due to the widespread influence of mass media, which reduced the availability of venues for traditional performing arts. For example, in Bali, the 1980s boom in television viewers led to the closing of 80% of theatre groups (Hobart, 1999). Global media conglomerates' dominance threatens local cultural production areas economically and aesthetically (Cohen, 2007; Smiers, 2003). Local artistic diversity is threatened by corporate culture and the homogenization of cultural traditions by government authorities, educational institutions, media institutions, professional groups, and various commercial forces. Sasak puppetry specifically faces significant challenges in terms of preservation and advancement (Lazuardi et al., 2020), with many puppets shows moving to broadcast media platforms such as television (Mrázek, 2019).

Shadow puppet performances in Indonesia have evolved and adapted to modern situations, such as by transforming their performance concepts and narrative content. For example, since the 1990s, Bali's traditional puppetry has been modernized into a unique form and grown into a dynamic and ever-changing art form. I Made Sidia, the Balinese puppeteer, pioneered *wayang skateboard*, a type of puppet performance in which puppeteers (usually three or more) move on skateboards while performing the puppet behind a three- to five-meter white screen (Cohen, 2016). Modernizing Balinese puppetry led to the emergence of new variations and the emergence of female puppeteers in Bali (Cohen, 2016; Goodlander, 2012). In addition, paintings, installation art, and social media have transformed the shadow puppet tradition in Java, particularly in Yogyakarta and Surakarta, by serving as platforms for political satire and critique of cultural heritage narratives and development programs. Ki Catur 'Benyek' Kuncoro, the Yogyakarta puppeteer, invented '*wayang hip-hop*', combining shadow puppetry with modern digital music genres like hip-hop, dangdut, and rap. This innovative approach actively engages young people in their cultural heritage (Varela, 2014). In addition, Sujiwo Tejo, a puppeteer from Jember, East Java, popularized puppetry by incorporating guitar accompaniment and modern theatre dramaturgy. Ki Enthus, a puppeteer from Tegal, Central Java, created *wayang planet*, a show featuring world superheroes like Batman, Batwoman, and various manga characters (Cohen, 2007). The development of this performance style reflects the puppet's adaptation to modern circumstances.

Sasak puppetry is severely underdeveloped compared to other cultural assets in Lombok, such as the oral telling of Princess Mandalika's story. This story inspires Lombok society to conduct the Bau Nyale Festival, a tradition of catching sea worms on the 20th day of the tenth month in the traditional Sasak calendar, as a creative economic activity (Hilmiyatun et al., 2022). Elsewhere in Indonesia, the people of Banyuwangi, West Java, have run the Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival for seven years to promote local traditional arts on a global scale; it has become one of Indonesia's most innovative tourism events (Anoeграjekti et al., 2018). Bandung has gained international recognition as a creative city because of the presence of three villages – Dago Pojok, Cigadung 'Batik City', and Binongjati – that feature creative economy concepts (Bustamante Duarte et al., 2024). Further, the transformation of *wayang beber* into batik cloth has strengthened traditional cultural assets which serve as the foundation for the creative economy movement (Kumara, 2020). Indeed, Lombok's arts have undergone modernization since the 2000s (Satrya HD et al., 2019).

It is surprising, that Sasak puppetry has not made significant progress in its development. This situation has led to the hypothesis that there are factors that restrain the development of Sasak puppetry. This study aims to explore the real conditions in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, and discover the various factors that inhibit the development, utilization, and modernization of Sasak puppetry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars, students, and critics of traditional performing arts have not given significant attention to Sasak puppetry. The current discussion primarily focuses on Javanese and Balinese puppets rather than Sasak puppets, including Cohen (2007, 2016), Mrázek (2019), and (Varela, 2014, 2016). Shadow puppets in Java have

progressed from narrating stories to multimodal performances with gamelan and digital music (Cohen, 2007). Javanese shadow puppets evolved gradually and adaptively in response to societal, technological, and political changes; the puppets' form and substance have adapted with the times. Some shadow puppeteers use animatronics by incorporating technology into their performances, allowing the communication with scriptwriters through email and downloading new gamelan instruments from the internet and mobile phones (Cohen, 2016). Furthermore, Cohen date claims that many advancements in Javanese shadow puppetry inspired western artists to use shadow puppets in other forms of artistic expression. Edward Gordon Craig's play, *Drama for Fools*, which includes at least thirty short films, exemplifies how the art of the leather puppet influenced the development of other artistic works (Siniscalchi, 1980). However, the beber puppet of Remeng Mangunjaya in Gelaran in Yogyakarta, which are among the oldest in Java, faces a significant risk of extinction (Suwondo et al., 2025). Cohen (2007) also mentions how Balinese puppets inspired European and American artists to create hybrid performances that integrated traditional puppets with modern technology. The dynamic development of Balinese puppetry led to the rise of female puppeteers such as Ni Ketut Trijati and Ni Wayan Rasiani (Goodlander, 2012). Female Balinese puppeteers exceeded male-associated puppetry, establishing gender equality in Balinese society.

Meanwhile, Yousof and Khor (2017) explore the traditional shadow puppetry of Kelantan, Malaysia. They consider the significance of Kelantan shadow puppets in Malaysian culture, specifically in relation to the Ramayana epic. These puppets serve as a full-fledged art form that combines music, dance, and the visual arts, as well as being a tool for spreading religious beliefs. Ghani (2012), on the other hand, revealed that Kelantan shadow puppetry faces numerous challenges, including declining community interest, particularly in metropolitan areas, as a result of the widespread proliferation of modern entertainments such as films, radio, and television. Ghani (2012) also stated that the dispute over the Islamic perspective on shadow theatre, which resulted in a prohibition in certain regions including Kelantan compounded the difficulties faced by the Kelantan puppet tradition. To prevent its extinction, Ghani (2012) proposes digitizing and displaying it on computer screens or in films. This would increase its appeal to the younger demographic, who are more accustomed to using digital media.

A similar phenomenon has been observed in Indian shadow puppetry. Lopes (2016) sees Indian puppetry as having evolved from narrative paintings to motion pictures, resulting in advances in storytelling methods that provide a more engaging and immersive experience for viewers. Similarly, Rui (2018) observes that shadow puppetry has evolved significantly in northern Sichuan, China, where the Wang Piyang community is working hard to preserve this intangible cultural treasure and gain national and international recognition. These efforts include market adaptation, building new groups, increasing global visibility, and participating in cultural heritage initiatives.

The literature on shadow puppets underscores their dynamic transformation and adaptation to current global circumstances. Sasak puppetry has been the focus of at least two studies, which concentrated on its use as a traditional form of communication in the digital age (Lazuardi et al., 2020) and its relationship with music, and the delicate balance between religious belief and technology (Harnish, 2003). However, a fundamental issue remains unexplored, specifically the community's perspective on Sasak puppets and the factors which lead to their stagnation and lack of development, in contrast to other cultural assets. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gather a comprehensive understanding of the current condition of Sasak puppetry by obtaining information from the community or its owners.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in June to July 2023 across five different districts of Lombok Island: West Lombok, Mataram, Central Lombok, North Lombok, and East Lombok. The study involved 18 participants, representing expertise in Sasak puppetry, culture, literacy, multimedia, and tourism (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participants

Code	Sex	Roles/Affiliation
P1	Man	Puppeteer and puppeteer's teacher
P2	Man	Puppeteer
P3	Woman	Fashion designer
P4	Man	Cultural actor/gamelan player
P5	Man	Tourism business actor/event organizer
P6	Man	Writer, artist
P7	Woman	Founder of Sasak Puppeteer School

Table 1: Participants (continued)

Code	Sex	Roles/Affiliation
P8	Man	Chairman of Wayang Sasak Puppetry Community
P9	Man	Tourism business actor/tour guide
P10	Man	Content creator/social media activist
P11	Man	Puppeteer
P12	Man	Cultural activist and chief of cultural community
P13	Man	Sasak cultural expert
P14	Woman	Literacy activist
P15	Man	Sasak cultural expert
P16	Man	Gamelan player/flute player
P17	Man	Illustrator, animator, and graphic designer
P18	Man	Leather puppet carver

This study employs the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, which originated in psychology, to comprehend personal interpretations and interactions within the framework of social construction (Noon, 2018). IPA allows researchers to gain insight into the essence of human experiences among participants, as well as individuals' interpretations and understandings of those experiences (Hutagalung et al., 2022; Robinson & Williams, 2024; Suwondo et al., 2024). This approach also allows the use of multiple hermeneutics and interpretations, ensuring that the researchers' personal biases do not affect the understanding of meaning; the participants experience and interpret their own experiences, while the researchers understand and interpret the results of participants' understanding and interpretation of life experiences. The participants in this study are referred to as 'P' to ensure confidentiality of their identity, experiences, and personal narratives.

This study used a semi-structured interview to gather data, inquiring into the historical context, philosophical meaning, functional aspects, individuals involved, inheritance patterns, the dynamics of Sasak puppetry from the past to the present, difficulties encountered, and aspirations for the advancement of Sasak puppetry. Throughout the interview process, data were captured through audio recording. Subsequently, the recorded data was transcribed into written form and its accuracy was validated through multiple comparisons with the recorded interviews and by participants.

The hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation of IPA is crucial during the analysis phase (Folgueiras Bertomeu & Sandín Esteban, 2023). The approach focuses on uncovering the fundamental nature of a phenomenon through the interpretation and documentation of participants' experiences and impressions using diverse and creative methods. Hence, IPA (Miller et al., 2018) is employed for data analysis, in four steps: (1) identifying impressions derived from social situations, (2) organizing and categorizing these impressions by converting them into codes, (3) condensing the codes into meaningful units, and (4) synthesizing the condensed information into descriptions and concepts (Giorgi, 2012). This study sequentially reviewed the transcripts and other data, with the goal of comprehending the experiences of the Lombok people as owners of Sasak puppetry. This involved examining their experiences, circumstances, difficulties, and prospects related to Sasak puppetry.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Sasak puppet: Expectations and irony

The material Sasak puppet is profoundly philosophical, symbolizing the elements and cosmic voyage of the universe. The blank *kelir*, a white screen, signifies the pre-existence of beings known as *awang-uwung*, while the *blencong* lamp symbolizes *nur*, the creator's light, and the *gunungan*, a mountain, represents the earth prepared for life (P6, personal communication, June 21, 2023). *Wong Menak* and *Munigarim* represent the first humans on earth (comparable to Adam and Eve), who gave birth to the world of right (good; puppets to the right of the puppeteer) and left (badness; puppets to the left of the puppeteer), symbolizing the conflict that followed. Sasak puppets illustrate the interplay of personal and social energy in the battle against the 'left world', which is characterized by arrogance. Jayengrana, Umar Maya, Umar Madi, Maktal, Taptanus/Santanus, Selandir, and Munigarim, the puppet characters on the right, frequently serve as intermediaries for the puppeteers to convey positive ideals and lessons. Sasak puppetry hence addresses societal issues and promotes moral principles and social behaviour within the community, independent of formal educational institutions (P4, personal communication, June 19, 2023). Furthermore, the Sasak puppet serves as a medium for criticizing government authorities (P15, personal communication, June 24, 2023; P16, personal communication, June 23, 2023).

This philosophical value underpins the belief of Sasak puppet performers that their intangible culture is not merely physical products and entertainment but has the economic potential to sustain life (P1, personal

communication, June 19, 2023). The term 'economic potential' in this context denotes the capacity to generate financial profit. Lombok's fashion designers have indicated commercial potential for the diverse Sasak puppet ornaments to be transformed into products such as batik, woven fabric, and non-fashion accessories (P3, personal communication, June 19, 2023). In the meantime, tourism industry agents consider Sasak puppetry to be a potential tourist attraction in Lombok due to its aesthetic appeal and uniqueness. The issue at hand is the lack of a venue that regularly hosts Sasak puppet shows and has an established performance schedule (P9, personal communication, June 20, 2023). The potential of Sasak puppetry is actually no less fascinating than that of natural tourism, which includes mountain climbing and diving, and it is highly probable that Sasak shadow puppets will become the most popular tourism draw in Lombok.

The organizers of *sekaha* or *sanggar* cultural communities also hope that Sasak puppetry can evolve along with the development of digital technology (P4, personal communication, June 19, 2023). They expect to transform Sasak puppetry into an online game to meet local children's and young people's tendency to know and remember online game characters better than the Sasak puppet characters. The willingness to transform the Sasak puppet into digital media has also emerged among illustrators and graphic designers. Comic strips and animated films based on Sasak puppets are likely to attract the attention of younger generations looking to learn more about Sasak puppets (P17, personal communication, June 24, 2023). Sasak puppets have potential to become economically valuable products in digital format.

However, the aspirations for developing Sasak puppetry confront ironic realities about Lombok's local citizenship. The fashion designer (P3, personal communication, June 19, 2023) we interviewed only recently learnt that Lombok has Sasak puppets with various potentials in the field of fashion. Conversely, very few, if any, schools dedicate a core cultural program to Sasak puppetry, resulting in students and the younger generation possessing minimal or no knowledge or awareness of Sasak puppetry (P14, personal communication, June 21, 2023). A senior puppeteer fully acknowledges that the community's ignorance and indifference result from the lack of socialisation and accurate or authentic written sources that can serve as a reference and information source (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023). Ironically, not all Sasak puppeteers own a complete set of these puppets. When they perform, they must borrow from someone else, or from a puppet collector. During an interview with a puppeteer in West Lombok following his performance, he admitted that he did not have his own puppets for that night's performance.

'I don't have any puppets. For this performance, I borrowed from another puppeteer. Tonight's performance features puppets made of mica, not cowhide. Buying puppets made from cowhide is very expensive. I can't afford it.' (P2, personal communication, June 19, 2023)

Another puppeteer (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023) stated that a puppeteer must have a large amount of money to own a complete set of Sasak puppets, both right and left. The puppets' high cost is due to the materials. High-quality Sasak puppets are made from the skin of menopausal cows, and can last a decade. Puppet prices have increased due to the difficulty in finding menopausal cows. The prices per figure range from 250,000 IDR (\$15–16) to approximately 2,500,000 IDR (\$151–153). Female puppet figures cost more because of their complexity and the precise crafting required.

Another factor affecting the Sasak puppet supply is that the number of puppet makers is decreasing. This problem appears to be widespread in traditional culture (Prasetya et al., 2024). In reality, the number of puppet makers in Lombok is negligible. Interviewed on July 20, 2023, the oldest puppet craftsman expressed the possibility of being the last.

'Neither of my children has inherited my abilities. My children can carve leather, but they are not yet skilled at drawing and sketching figures on cowhide. In the end, I drew and sketched them. No children want to learn how to make Sasak puppets. Perhaps it's due to a lack of customers or buyers.' (P18, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

Another issue that has resulted in an unsettling progression for Sasak puppetry is the decreasing number of senior puppeteers and the wide gap between them and junior puppeteers. There are 50 senior puppeteers in Lombok, according to the records of *Pepadi*, the Indonesian Puppeteers Association for West Nusa Tenggara. Central Lombok is home to 15 puppeteers, while East Lombok has three puppeteers (P8, personal communication, June 20, 2023).

4.2 The development of Sasak puppetry: Between the classical and the modern

Local communities in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, are taking a variety of approaches to address the Sasak puppet issue. There are two perspectives on the development of Sasak shadow puppetry: some want Sasak shadow puppetry to maintain its traditional or conventional form; others want Sasak puppets to be more modern. Almost all Sasaks understand that philosophically, Sasak shadow puppets function as a medium for

education, communication, and the reinforcement of morals and ethical behaviour. People have long regarded shadow puppetry as a timeless original Indonesian art form, highly valued as a classic (Sears, 1996). The Sasak community, especially the oldest generation, also believes that maintaining Sasak shadow puppetry's classic status is fundamental. Thus, the conventional notion of shadow puppetry reflects a static tradition and positions puppet as an elitist, philosophical, and religious art (Geertz, 1960).

The older generation in Lombok has expressed concern that the influence of global culture could cause Sasak shadow puppetry to lose its *pamor*, inherent sacredness, and nobility, and to deviate from the *pakem*, the basic guidelines of performance. They believe that traditional practices are more honourable. However, they are keenly aware that technological and media developments are affecting interest in Sasak puppetry, causing Sasak puppet shows to become ever less popular (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023; P2, personal communication, June 19, 2023). The rapid social developments clearly have negative implications for the existence of local cultures (Boonstra, 2011), leading to fears that the older puppeteers and conservative puppet fans will lose their Sasak Identity.

Identity is important and the people of Lombok strongly uphold their Sasak identity by positioning the puppet performances as a medium for dialogue between the puppeteer, who represents the community, with the spirits of the ancestor world. Many believe that the Sasak puppet revives ancient sacred mythologies. Changing it to include elements of modernity raises concerns that Sasak shadow puppetry will lose its 'spirit' (P16, personal communication, June 24, 2023). However, senior puppeteers acknowledge the indispensability of modernity in various facets of life (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023). Nevertheless, a young puppeteer (P11, personal communication, July 1, 2023) is wise enough to address the debate between *pakem* and modernity in *wayang Sasak* performances. "Not to worry," he says, "because traditional and modern can work together". However, he acknowledges that his opinion faces resistance due to the significant divide between proponents of traditional *pakem* and those advocating for modernization. However, the senior puppeteer (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023) supported this opinion, asserting that a fusion of traditional and modern performance models will restore Sasak puppetry's popularity.

'We are now in the modern world, the digital world, so we must adjust to it all. However, the primary focus should be on the puppets from the *babon*, which are considered the main source, or those based on the *pakem*. After thoroughly understanding the *pakem*, the next step is to create it as a modern concept.' (P1, personal communication, June 19, 2023)

The traditional Sasak puppetry or *pakeliran pakem* adheres to the classical norms and takes place over 6–8 hours during night-time performances (Harnish, 2007). The classical structure includes: (1) *rangsang* (opening gamelan accompaniment), (2) lighting the *labak* lamp (*blencong*; a coconut oil lamp), (3) *bedodog* (the puppeteer recites a spell to give spirits to the puppets), (4) *pengaksama*, a greeting for visible creatures, (5) bringing out the *gunungan* – mountain – and the male and female puppets, accompanied by *rangsang* music, and moving the puppets left and right three times, (6) positioning the *gunungan* – central 'mountain' puppet – and separating *Jayengrane* and *Munigarim*, (7) *pengabut* (*sendon*, a brief introduction of story; *ladrang*, a form of instrumental song for strengthen the atmosphere, storytelling practice), (8) *ngabor*, puppeteer's greeting for visible and invisible creatures (accompanied by *gending kabor*, a slow rhythm and instrument, conveying wisdom), (9) *penerep* (pengantar, storytelling), (10) *penangkilan*, the meeting of royal officials (11) *lampan*, the journey is started, (12) interlude, (13) battle, and (14) *gunungan* section. During *pakeliran pakem*, classical-style performance, the puppeteers use three languages: *Kawi*, Sasak, and Balinese (Harnish, 2003). Today, classical performances no longer attracted a large audience (P4, personal communication, June 19, 2023). Language is also a problematic for today's audiences, who are unfamiliar with *Kawi*, old Javanese language (*Jajawan*), Sasak, and Balinese. In fact, as early as 2003, *pakeliran pakem* audience sizes and interest were dwindling, due in part to the lengthiness of performances (Harnish, 2003).

Aside from the long duration of the night-time performance and the language, which may be difficult for the current generation to understand, the show's content or story presents additional challenges. Classical performances typically depict the eternal conflict between virtue and evil. Many foreign tourists find classical stories, particularly war stories, to be boring (P9, personal communication, June 20, 2023). The tour guide (P9, personal communication, June 20, 2023) stated that foreign tourists frequently enquire about the possibility of love stories in Sasak puppets. Unfortunately, classical puppet performances rarely tell the stories that tourists want to hear. In summary, classical Sasak puppet performances have a limited ability to reach a larger audience due to their lengthy duration (6–8 hours), constant focus on war stories, language barriers, and lack of translators for foreign audiences. To reach a larger audience, Sasak puppeteers must adapt to the current situation and conditions. This finding shows that Sasak puppetry, which embodies philosophical values and symbols, must address the challenges of modern life as it moves away from its traditional roots and gradually alters its performance format to adapt to modernity, which tends to be entertainment-orientated.

4.3 Detraditionalizing Sasak puppetry: A re-understanding of medium and context

There has yet to be a resolution to the ongoing debate between defending the classic model and attempting to adapt Sasak puppetry to social change. In the present day, certain cultural communities, including the younger generation, are attempting to re-comprehend Sasak puppetry. There are two primary objectives in the debate between the classical and the modern: to advance the classical, and to preserve its traditional principles. Detraditionalization and decontextualization can help with these goals because they involve taking tradition out of its original meanings and context and redefining it for particular purposes (Harnish, 2007; Heelas, 1996; Lash, 1996; Morris, 1996). In Lombok, detraditionalization has not been applied to Sasak puppetry; the puppets have maintained their original leather form, unaltered to suit the current environment. Face-to-face interaction continues to be their prevalent setting. Simultaneously, today's context, characterized as 'post-traditional and even precursory to post-modern', has witnessed a shift in interpersonal communication from face-to-face to mediated and pseudo-mediated exchanges. In-person interactions happen in specific places and at specific times, but mediated and pseudo-interactions go beyond those limits. This makes it easier for people who are not in the same place or time to form social bonds (Thompson, 1996). At present, Sasak puppetry remains marginalized in the realm of pseudo-mediated communication, outside digital platforms like radio and television.

The fear of losing self-identity and collective identity underlies the concern that detraditionalization will sever Sasak puppetry from its traditional roots and replace it with something new. Understanding the medium and context of this era is crucial to 're-playing' Sasak puppetry without losing Sasak self- and collective identity. The Lombok community's failure to recognize Sasak puppets as a cultural asset indicates that more modern mainstream media has undermined them. The notion of detraditionalization suggests, however, that modernity does not entirely eradicate tradition but rather transforms it in certain aspects, like pouring fresh water into an old bottle.

To increase attractiveness for tourism, detraditionalization can reconstruct the narrative, duration and timing of the performance, and the language. For each performance, the puppeteers could select universal Lombok romantic stories to cater to the needs of specific audiences, including travellers from beyond Lombok Island. The usual 6–8-hour night-time performance can be shifted to shorter, 30–50 minutes daytime performances, allowing foreign tourists from outside Lombok to experience the beauty of the island's other side. During such detraditionalization, some of Sasak puppetry's classical elements could very well evolve into a 'new' product that retains its traditional roots. A puppeteer can use translators to better accommodate the audience's diverse language backgrounds, including western travellers.

Detraditionalization has become a trend in Southeast Asia, defined as a shift 'from ritual (tradition) to spectacle' (Lindsay, 1995). The modern era, with its rapid social and media developments, should encourage the commodification of Sasak puppetry to adapt to audience tastes and prevent its extinction. The puppets will very likely be detraditionalized to match the tastes of today's audiences. Reformatting the performance concept would not strip Sasak puppetry of its traditional roots; the commodification process still produces Sasak puppetry as a distinctive cultural product of Lombok, and performers can still organize Sasak puppet performances in the classical format as a traditional event for Lombok locals. The concept of detraditionalization thus refers to adapting Sasak puppetry to contemporary mainstream contexts and media (P12, personal communication, June 12, 2023).

A collaborative performance named *Pertale Gumi* features Sasak puppets as part of the detraditionalization process. This performance is an attempt to decontextualize Sasak puppets with various media simultaneously on one stage. *Pertale Gumi*, or *World Within Folds*, involves various puppet types including bottle puppets, robot puppets, puppets that implement artificial intelligence, and theatre concepts. *Pertale Gumi* blends traditional and modern concepts. The multidimensional concept presents puppets on a 5-metre by 10-metre screen, providing a new experience for audiences who have only seen puppets on a 3-metre by 1-metre screen. The story focuses on Jayengrane's best friend, Umar Maye, who is worried and confused because his magic suitcase – *gegandek* – is constantly shaking. In the classic story, *Umar Maye* saves *Jayengrane* from a large number of enemies, by putting *Jayengrane* and the entire kingdom, folded, into his magic suitcase.

The stage is divided into three screens: one for bottle puppetry on the left, a large main screen at the centre, and a Sasak puppetry screen on the right (Figure 1). The Sasak puppets retain their classic style, while the bottle puppets are chroma-keyed into background visuals on the main screen according to the storyline. Camera shots of both the bottle performance and the Sasak puppet performance were combined on the main screen, establishing a connection between Umar Maye from the classic Sasak puppet show and Umar Maye from the bottle puppet show. The direct portrayal of the human figure as the child Umar Maye, combined with the concept of theatre, demonstrates the collaborative and multidimensional nature of the *Pertale Gumi* performance. The performance is accompanied by two musical groups: traditional gamelan players for the traditional Sasak puppets and a group of modern musicians for the bottle puppets. Although they play modern

instruments (guitar, bass, trumpet, and drums), the colour and character of the bottle puppet music remain rooted in the seeds of Sasak puppet music. The *Pertale Gumi* is a model of detraditionalization in which the Sasak puppet moves into new media and contexts in digital, *spectacle-orientated* spaces without being severed from its classical roots.



Figure 1: *Pertale Gumi*, Multidimensional puppet performance
Source: Sekolah Wayang Sasak (2023)

Another attempt at detraditionalization involves creating miniature Sasak puppets, like those on display at the 2023 *Media Arts Community Festival: Land of Dialectics* in Lombok (Figure 2). At the exhibition, visitors have the opportunity to directly interact with Sasak puppets through the *touch-listen-imagine concept*. On pressing a button beneath each puppet figure, visitors can hear the character's voice exactly as it sounds during a live performance. This exhibition involves a variety of experts with specialized skills, including puppeteers as voice actors, puppet craftsmen to prepare the mini-puppets, sound experts, and other art experts. Seeking to detraditionalize the Sasak puppet while maintaining its classic essence, the creators adapted it to the current context where people predominantly access everything through smart devices. The mini puppets with their digital buttons eliminate the distance between the audience and Sasak puppets.



Figure 2: Sasak puppet leather by Amaq Darwina
Source: Zamzuri et al. (2023)

The creators of *Pertale Gumi* and the mini-puppet exhibition have made concrete efforts to bridge the gap between current audiences and Sasak puppets, aiming to reduce the distance between them. The two approaches aim to comprehend both the medium and the current context, positioning Sasak puppets as cultural assets that align with social developments and modern media. However, these two approaches alone do not also bridge the gap between the Sasak community and Sasak puppets, as they instead establish new boundaries

that reduce the community to mere spectators (P17, personal communication, June 24, 2023). As spectators, people are consumers, not creators. The important thing that must grow in the community is a sense of belonging to Sasak puppets. Therefore, *Sekolah Pedalangan Wayang Sasak (SPWS)*, the Sasak Puppetry School, actively involves the community in coaching sessions based on the *sibaturta* cultural literacy method that combines *simak, baca, tulis, tutur, tayang* – listening, reading, writing, speaking, and performing.

Focusing on children and adolescents in Lombok, the program applies freedom in recognizing, learning, and understanding Sasak puppets. Children and teenagers learn in accordance with Lombok society's context and characteristics. The *simak* element provides opportunities for children hear about Sasak puppets, their history, performance patterns, language, and various other things. *Baca* is no different from reading in general, but focuses on the ability to find information about puppet shows that still use the old Javanese language. Next, *tulis* aims to enhance children's writing literacy through their reading experiences. Speech, or *tutur*, aims to enhance children's speaking abilities through presenting the outcomes of their reading. Finally, *performing – tayang* – aims to bring children closer to Sasak puppets through digital channels by inviting them to watch the master performances and practice as a puppeteer. This detraditionalization initiates the emergence of methods to develop and revive Sasak puppetry in the 21st century while preserving it as a source of intangible cultural heritage.

4.4 Cultural policy: Representation and awareness of the government

The interviews from Lombok reflect hopes that Sasak puppetry will be viable as a cultural treasure in the region. As policymakers, local and central governments should be concerned with a variety of expectations including funding, training (including for children), performance venues, and the procurement of puppets for puppeteers who do not have puppets of their own. If the government, which is in charge of the policy, does not respond promptly, the community's aspirations will evaporate into insignificance. The government should, therefore, make cultural policy an essential priority.

It is essential for the government to realign its efforts towards preserving cultural heritage that is in imminent danger of extinction. The following three objectives are especially imperative: the preservation of cultural heritage, its universal dissemination, and the provision of support for creative arts endeavours (Brunel, 2012). Sasak puppet preservation extends beyond preserving physical puppets as artifacts. Preservation can integrate more modern concepts, such as the use of the metaverse for preserving the history of historical campuses in Indonesia (Mahardika et al., 2024). Digitizing puppetry is one way to enable its communication across regional, national, and even global boundaries. The government should implement policies aimed at transliterating and digitizing the stories written in the literary classic *Serat Menak* and on palm leaves. The concept of creating a virtual mini museum of Sasak puppets, for example, opens up wider possibilities for introducing Sasak puppets to spaces that have no boundaries. The *Sekolah Pedalangan Wayang Sasak (SPWS)* has been digitizing Sasak puppets and developed a virtual mini-museum with scannable QR codes (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A virtual mini-museum of Sasak puppets
Source: Rachmawati (2023)

Developing creativity is the next priority. Government policies that support youth, adolescents, and communities encourage the development of artistic ability in the form of new works inspired by Sasak puppets. Cultural experts should be engaged to educate and coach the public. To prevent the depletion of leather craftsmen specializing in *sungging painting technique*, for instance, the government may arrange puppet-making instruction in collaboration with master craftsmen in Lombok. The government could provide children

and adolescents with puppeteering instruction. To further support the craft and fashion industries, the government could propose a program combining fashion design expertise with instruction in the creation of accessories and fashion items, such as charms and woven fabrics inspired by the embellishments found on Sasak puppets. Cultural policy also prioritizes the development of multimedia skills, including illustration, filmmaking, graphic design, and animation, to produce designers, illustrators, animators, and animators capable of converting Sasak puppets into interactive digital products. Formal education, along with mentoring, training, and skill development, serves a significant purpose. Psychologists acknowledge the importance of fostering creativity in children and adolescents during their formative years. Schools should therefore facilitate and serve as a setting that fosters the development of a creative character. For educational institutions to become laboratories for cultivating artistic ingenuity, it is essential to develop curriculum and learning materials to foster ongoing artistic and cultural innovation under the guidance of the most eminent professionals. Incorporating Sasak puppetry into local curriculum will increase the likelihood of fostering cultural consciousness in young generations.

The preservation, development, and policy of cultural heritage hold significant importance; this needs to continue, with cultural directions and laws that support the care and development of Sasak puppetry. It is essential to start with mentoring and training for local communities. The art forms of both great civilizations and contemporary art should be integrated into the knowledge and competence base so as to appeal to people's imagination and feelings to develop the potential of local cultural wealth into a force that drives creative economic activity for a better life. Cultural policy must correct the impact of social injustice and counterbalance the influence of modern cultural industries, media and art markets.

Policy for maintaining and developing Sasak puppetry is the responsibility of the local government, specifically government agencies in West Nusa Tenggara. From 1983 to 2007, West Nusa Tenggara's cultural policy for arts and culture generally showed good progress. In 2007, Lombok boasted over 1,000 sanggar, or sakaha, and the local government selected Sasak puppetry for 'upgrading or modernization' (Harnish, 2003; 2007). During that decade, local government worked to maintain the classical style by restricting humorous content, aiming to provide an aesthetic experience through performances in buildings. Audience sizes, however, fell considerably. The drop in audience numbers led the government to shift support for Sasak puppetry to other Lombok performances (Ecklund, 2002).

To restore cultural glory, the West Nusa Tenggara provincial government issued Regional Regulation Number 16 in 2021. This regulation outlines eleven general duties for the government: including promoting regional culture, preserving diversity, managing information systems, providing facilities and infrastructure, organizing language, script, and literature months, providing funding, establishing community involvement mechanisms, encouraging active roles, and reviving a sustainable cultural ecosystem. It also ensures cultural protection and expression, safeguarding freedom of expression. However, the regulation does not explicitly mention Sasak puppetry as a culture that needs development in Lombok. This has led to a lack of government focus on Sasak puppets.

The lack of explicit mention in regional regulations is weakening the presence of Sasak puppets in Lombok society. In fact, UNESCO has recognized puppets as an intangible cultural heritage (Jones, 2018), and the Indonesian government established National Puppet Day on November 7 through Presidential Decree No. 30/2018. However, many challenges to Sasak puppetry remain unexplored, such as the lack of reliable written sources, comprehensive shadow puppet collections, the current generation's disregard for them, the decline of *penyungging* craftsmen who make Sasak shadow puppets, the scarcity of puppets for creative economic value production, and the lack of facilities for regular performances. Cultural policy in Lombok society should address these issues to promote Sasak puppets globally while maintaining the traditional roots of the Sasak people.

5. CONCLUSION

Lombok's Sasak puppetry culture needs immediate attention and support from stakeholders including the community and the local government. The issues include the absence of reliable written sources about Sasak puppetry's historical development, a lack of socialization, a lack of successors, a lack of guidance for community resource development, and a lack of puppets among puppeteers. Additionally, the absence of a local curriculum on Sasak puppets in educational units hinders young people's opportunity to understand and develop a sense of belonging to the puppets. The polemic between classical and modern remains a stumbling block to Sasak puppetry's adaptation to the modern world. Should these issues remain unresolved, children and grandchildren may only be able to learn about the history of Sasak puppets at a distance, without actually experiencing them first-hand.

The non-governmental *Sekolah Pedalangan Wayang Sasak* (SPWS) has undertaken a detraditionalization of Sasak puppetry through the performance of *Pertale Gumi*, or *World in Folds*, a multidimensional puppet

shows that combines traditional Sasak puppets with modern puppets such as bottle puppets, robot puppets, and artificial intelligence puppets. SPWS also develops the *sibaturta* method to help children identify and comprehend the Sasak puppet tradition. Other problems remain unsolved, such as the regeneration of leather crafters for puppets and training to translate Sasak puppetry into crafts, fashion, multimedia, and tourism.

Cross-sectoral policies are required. Community, government, and Lombok society must work together to bring Sasak puppetry to the fore. UNESCO recognition and the establishment of a National Puppet Day alone are insufficient to address the issues hindering the advancement of Sasak puppetry. The West Nusa Tenggara Provincial Government should enhance its Regional Regulation on the Promotion of Lombok Culture by implementing more technical and directly applicable regulations that explicitly address the practical issues related to Sasak puppets. They should also incorporate innovations such as providing a one-stop service for cultural-education tourism centres centred on Sasak puppets. Subsequently, we can explore Sasak puppetry development and utilization models that align with the growth of Lombok community resources and global needs, thereby formulating a comprehensive development strategy.

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