

Magic and Rituality Narratives in the Sendang Gede Tembalang Tradition: Vladimir Propp's Narratology Study on the Structure of Oral Stories

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Abstract This article examines oral narratives and rites in the tradition of Sendang Gede Tembalang using Vladimir Propp's narratological approach. As the largest spring in Tembalang, Sendang Gede holds local myths about magical powers, a supernatural guardian named Mbah Didi, and prohibitions passed down orally. Traditions such as the sowing of flowers on the night of 1 Suro show that this rite is not just a habit, but contains a fixed narrative structure. Applying Propp's narrative functions, this study examines the fixed structure of oral speech, finding patterns of action, prohibition, violation, consequence, and resolution that resemble the structure of universal folk tales. The results show that the rituals and myths of the sendang have a stable narrative pattern and function as a means of value transmission and social control in society.

Keywords: Sendang Gede, Narratology, Vladimir Propp, Ritual Structure, Oral Traditions.

1 Introduction

Sendang Gede was the main water source in the past that was the largest in the Tembalang area, precisely located in Tirtosari street. In addition to its ecological and historical value, Sendang Gede is interpreted as a spiritual site full of magical beliefs. In the narrative of the local community, this spring is associated with healing powers, the supernatural appearance of fish, and the existence of a spirit called Mbah Didi, who is believed to be the guardian of Sendang. Ritual practices such as sowing flowers on the night of 1 Suro, certain prohibitions that must be obeyed by visitors, and the obligation to provide offerings are part of the ritual structure that is carried out periodically by the surrounding community. This shows that these beliefs and practices do not stand alone but are arranged in a tangle of narratives that have a certain pattern and are passed down orally across generations. The narratives of abstinence, disobedience and spiritual consequences form a stable story structure and show characteristics similar to the structure of universal folk tales.

Research on spring as a cultural space is generally divided into two main areas: myths and socio-religious values. Suryani [1], Shofiani et al. [2], and Fendy and Barokati [3] highlight the myths and narrative structures of the spring which are full of

cosmological, symbolic and magical beliefs. Meanwhile, Diantika [4] and Fitriyani et al. [5] emphasize the social and religious functions of the spring in people's lives, such as a medium for inheriting values and a form of respect for ancestors.

However, these studies tend to focus on descriptive ethnographic aspects, such as the meaning, function, or form of the rite, and have not revealed the internal narrative structure that shapes these cultural practices. Until now, no research has been found that specifically analyzed the Sendang Gede tradition in Tembalang, let alone with a structural narratology approach as developed by Vladimir Propp. In fact, Propp's approach, which compiles 31 narrative functions in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), has great potential to reveal patterns of action and flow in folklore and local rites, including sacred rites such as those found in the Sendang tradition.

Thus, this study examines the narrative structure in the tradition of Sendang Gede Tembalang using Vladimir Propp's narratological approach. The main focus is to examine how the oral narratives that accompany the rite - such as stories about prohibitions, violations, and spiritual consequences - follow stable narrative patterns and how this structure acts as a tool for value transmission, collective identity formation, and social control mechanisms in the supporting community. This research is expected to fill the void of narrative structure studies in the study of local folklore and rites, especially in the context of the spring as a sacred cultural space. This research is based on the assumption that the Sendang Gede tradition is part of oral literature that contains universal narrative patterns in it.

2 Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, utilizing Vladimir Propp's narrative structure theory, to identify narrative patterns and the cultural meanings contained within them. The data in this study consisted of oral narratives about the origins and mythological stories of Sendang Gede Tembalang. The primary data source was the key informant, Mr. Karnaan, a local community leader known as a custodian of stories and traditions related to the spring. Supporting data were obtained through a literature review, including narratological theories and previous studies on the myths of the spring.

Data collection techniques included participatory observation at the Sendang Gede site, in-depth interviews with a key informant, Mr. Karnaan, as the caretaker, and a literature review to support the theoretical framework. The analysis was conducted by identifying narrative structures based on Vladimir Propp's functions, such as interdiction, violation, villainy, dispatch, magical agent, and resolution, as well as recognition, which were

then reduced, categorized, and arranged chronologically according to the cultural context of the Tembalang community.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Analysis of Narrative Functions and Propp's Action Circle in the Oral Tradition of Sendang Gede Tembalang

Vladimir Propp (1968) in *Morphology of The Folktale* [6] states that the narrative structure of fairy tales has a fixed pattern and can be analysed through a series of narrative functions. He identified thirty-one functions, but emphasized that not all folktales or folk stories must contain all of these functions. Hasan [7] argued that the number of functions in a story is not important. In other words, the strength of the narrative structure does not lie in the completeness of the number of functions but in the regularity of their sequence and the presence of core functions that drive the narrative. Propp, as cited in [7], also emphasizes that the most important element in a fairy tale is not the characters or protagonists but the actions or deeds (functions) themselves. The characters in the story may change, but their functions remain constant.

Based on the above discussion, research related to oral traditions in Sendang Gede Tembalang reveals eight main functions in Propp's narratological structure:

3.1.1 The Function of Presence (α)

In Propp's narrative structure [6], the presence of a spring as the main source of life marks the beginning of the narrative plot. It acts as a sacred locus that unites the ecological and spiritual functions. As the largest spring in Tembalang, Sendang Gede is the center of collective community activities. It is not merely a physical source of water, but a wellspring of meaning in the local cosmological landscape. Spring water is considered to have a liminal dimension—a link between the human world and the supernatural world—that reinforces the spring's position as a sacred site.

3.1.2 The Function of Interdiction (γ)

The function of interdiction in this narrative appears as an unwritten rule that is passed down orally from generation to generation. The community is strictly prohibited from criticizing, behaving rudely, or taking resources indiscriminately from the spring. Within Propp's framework, interdiction is the starting point that initiates the narrative structure because it serves as a symbolic boundary between acceptable actions and those that incur sacred consequences. Structurally, this prohibition affirms that spring is a sacred space protected by customary and spiritual norms.

3.1.3 The Function of Violation (δ)

Violations occur when individuals or groups disregard such prohibitions. In many cases, these violations include overfishing, water pollution, or uttering profanities against the spring. In Propp's structure, this violation is the critical point that activates the narrative. This trigger brings chaos and opens the way for mystical consequences. The violation is not merely an individual mistake but symbolically represents an act that disrupts the harmony between humans and the supernatural world.

3.1.4 The Function of Villainy (A)

As in Propp's function [6], evil is a result of transgression. In the context of Sendang Gede, misfortune is not presented through a concrete antagonist but through spiritual disturbances such as possession, illness without medical cause, or behavioral disorders. Misfortune in this structure functions as a narrative mechanism to affirm prohibitions, reinforce norms, and create a dramatic tension that eventually demands resolution.

3.1.5 The Function of Dispatch (B)

In Propp's structure [6], dispatch marks the first step in the recovery effort. In the Sendang Gede tradition, a traditional elder or parent plays the role of dispatcher, who instructs the offender to perform a ritual of purification or apology. This demonstrates the existence of a social-spiritual structure that mediates between the offender and mystical forces, and explains that ritual knowledge is passed down communally and hierarchically. Structurally, dispatch is a restorative initiative, the beginning of spiritual transformation

3.1.6 The Function of Magical Agent (F)

Magical assistance is an important element of the Propp structure. In the case of Sendang Gede, this assistance is manifested through the power of the spring itself—water that is believed to have healing powers—and through the supernatural figure Mbah Didi, who is believed to be a guardian entity. Both acted as magical donors and helpers. Spring water, in the community's view, has a liminal dimension—it serves as a medium between the profane and sacred worlds, simultaneously acting as a healer and a punisher. Assistance does not appear automatically but is obtained after the protagonist undergoes a process of acknowledgment and redemption, which, in Propp's structure, is an absolute prerequisite for obtaining the magical agent.

3.1.7 The Function of Resolution (N)

The resolution is the conclusion of the Propp narrative cycle. In this tradition, resolution is achieved after the ritual is performed fully and sincerely, such as scattering flowers, bringing offerings, and asking permission from the guardian of the spring. This shows that the transformation of characters in the narrative is not only symbolic, but also has a real social and psychological impact. This resolution shows that the oral narrative functions therapeutically, as a collective mechanism for reordering the moral and spiritual order of society.

3.1.8 The Function of Recognition (R)

In Propp's narratology, the recognition (R) function is when the perpetrator realizes the meaning of what has happened. In the Sendang Gede tradition, this moment occurs when the offender realizes the consequences of his actions and admits that there has been a violation of sacred values. This confession is a healing and redemption ritual involving the community. After redemption, the offender returns to the community with a new awareness, which is cyclical and usually symbolized by participation in rituals such as Satu Suro. Although Prop does not explicitly mention social reintegration, it is important to understand the narrative of the oral tradition.

In Vladimir Propp's narrative theory, which includes 31 basic functions, seven circles of action form the logical framework for these functions [6]. These seven include: (1) the villain, the antagonist who opposes the hero; (2) the donor/provider; the figure who provides magical objects as assistance; (3) the magical helper, the figure who assists the hero when facing difficulties; (4) the princess and her father, the object of the quest or symbol of success; (5) the dispatcher, the one who recognizes the crisis and drives the hero's actions; (6) the hero/seeker hero, the main character who undergoes trials, receives assistance, and achieves rewards; and [7] the false hero, the fake character who attempts to steal the hero's honor and achievements (8) in (7).

In the oral tradition of Sendang Gede, five of Propp's seven action circles logically appear in the narrative structure of the community. The villain's environment is manifested through violations of customs, such as pollution of the spring, which causes spiritual misfortune. The dispatcher appears to be an elder who directs the perpetrator to undergo a purification ritual to restore spiritual balance. The donor/provider is seen in the mystical power of the spring water and entities such as Mbah Didi, who provides healing or protection. The magical helper is represented by the spring and supernatural guardian who assists in spiritual reconciliation. The hero is reflected in the perpetrator of the violation who transforms into a heroic figure through ritual and becomes a model in respecting the sacred order. Meanwhile, the action circles of the princess and her father as well as the false hero do not appear because the narrative does not focus on

the quest for a reward or the presence of a false rival. Thus, these five action circles form a logical framework within the value system and cosmology of the Tembalang community, which harmonizes with nature and the supernatural.

3.2 Ritual Sendang Gede sebagai Alat Transmisi Nilai dan Kontrol Sosial

Based on Vladimir Propp's narratological analysis, the ritual of Sendang Gede in Tembalang can be read as a narrative construction that not only arranges events in symbolic order but also works as a medium that transmits social values and institutes control mechanisms in society. The plot structure in this ritual contains typical narrative functions as identified by Propp in the morphology of folklore, such as "sacred beginning," "giving of moral injunctions," "test of obedience," to "establishment of order through symbolic climax." Each of these stages operates as a sign system that contains normative messages framed in the local cultural language. The process of opening the ritual with silence, asking permission from the ancestors, and respecting the sacred space, marks the phase of "separation" from the profane world to the sacred world that can only be accessed through respect and submission to traditional values.

The characterizations of this ritual also reflect the functional roles of Propp's narratology. Figures such as caretakers and elders, in this case Mr. Kamaan, act as dispatchers and donors, that is, interpreters of values and guardians of collective narratives. Their authority is legitimized by customary status and spiritual expertise, allowing them to exercise social control through narratives and symbols. Oral stories about adat violations and their consequences serve as normative reminders and a means of "symbolic punishment," which is effective in maintaining compliance.

The narrative structure of rituals forms imaginative scenarios that govern collective behavior. Even without the sanction of written law, customary narratives passed down through generations instill fear of spiritual and social consequences. Control is not exercised by formal institutions, but through a belief system that has been internalized by the community. Through the experience of ritual, individuals do not just obey rules because of external pressure, but also because of a moral awareness of the community and the sacred space they inhabit.

Sendang Gede's spatial setting plays an important role as a symbolic landscape. In the narratological framework, places are not just locations of action, but symbolic actors that shape collective perceptions. Sendang Gede is interpreted as a source of spiritual and ecological life, as well as a sacred space that instills cultural behavioral boundaries. This aura of sacredness creates symbolic control-determining who can enter, how to behave, and the accompanying consequences if violated.

Symbols in rituals such as offerings, prayers and flowers are not merely aesthetic, but narrative devices that represent values and ideologies. In Propp's narratology, this symbol functions as a magical agent that enables transformation and status transfer.

Values are conveyed non-verbally through symbolic language that touches cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains. Social control is also imaginative and non-coercive because the community internalizes the meaning contained in symbols and narratives. Thus, the Sendang Gede ritual functions as a living and dynamic cultural narrative to maintain the social order and collective value of the community.

4 Conclusion

This study shows that the narratives and rituals in the Sendang Gede Tembalang tradition have a stable and repetitive narrative structure, as formulated in Vladimir Propp's theory of folk-tale morphology. Of Propp's 31 narrative functions, eight main functions were identified as forming the framework of the sacred narrative around the spring: presence, prohibition, violation, crime, dispatch, magical assistance, resolution, and recognition. These functions are consistently present in both oral narratives and annual rituals, making the narrative structure an effective tool for maintaining social order, instilling ecological ethics and strengthening local spirituality.

The stability of this structure is an important indicator of preservation of oral traditions and rituals within the community. Narratives do not develop randomly, but follow a fixed pattern reflecting collective values and worldviews across generations. Propp's narratological approach is not only relevant in folklore studies but also opens up broader cultural research opportunities for understanding the sustainability of traditions and local identity.

However, the focus of this research remains limited to the structural aspects of narratives without delving deeply into the symbolic meanings and performative dimensions of rituals. Therefore, the presence of sacred symbols, repetitive verbal patterns, and collective expressions in rituals could be a potential area for further exploration through a semiotic approach and formulaic expression theory to enrich our understanding of the dynamics of meaning and cultural transmission in a more complex social context.

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