

# Women's Contestation of Traditional Space: The Existence and Identity Transformation of *Ludruk* in Indonesia and *Makyong* in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explain women's positions and roles in *ludruk* in the *wetanan* (eastern) region of East Java, Indonesia, and those in *makyong* in Malaysia. Studies centring on traditional women provide a unique academic forum to scrutinise their existence. This study was intended to contribute to that area of inquiry by exploring identity transformation in two genres of traditional performing arts in two Southeast Asian countries. Employing a critical ethnographic approach, it sought to make explicit the relationship between the two performing arts from the perspective of traditional women. Furthermore, it investigated the identity transformation emerging in *ludruk* and *makyong*. Data was gleaned from key informants involving *ludruk* leaders of Setia Kawan and Maharani groups in Indonesia. For the *makyong* in Malaysia, data was retrieved from the fourth generation of *makyong* performers. The results of this study revealed women's pivotal roles in the development of *ludruk* and *makyong*. The performance stage offers them decent and critical roles in both arts. Both traditional arts have experienced transformation in performance identity, especially concerning the traditional art ideology and performance structure as a response to ever-evolving market demands. In this regard, adaptable management of traditional arts is key to maintaining the continuity of *ludruk* and *makyong*. In this regard, theoretical implications of the study enhance our knowledge about the existence and development of traditional performing arts, and more particularly the dynamic

interaction between the ideological foundations. In real-life application, the study offers practical suggestions for curriculum planning of drama arts education.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 03 February 2025

Accepted: 08 September 2025

Published: 02 December 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.33.6.09>

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**Keyword:** Critical ethnography, contestation space of *ludruk* and *makyong*, traditional women, transformation of performance identity

## INTRODUCTION

This study delved into the existence of traditional women in *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia, which has not received sufficient attention to date. Several studies related to *ludruk* state men dominate the performance (Maryeni, 2002; Abdillah, 2009; Supriyanto, 2018). This phenomenon is often seen especially in *ludruk* performances in the *kulon* (western) regions of East Java, namely Surabaya, Malang, Jombang, Mojokerto, Sidoarjo, and Lamongan. The dominance of men has raised the need to view this cultural praxis from women's perspectives, which have been unheard. Likewise, research related to the traditional art of *makyong* in Malaysia has yet to receive serious attention, especially from the perspective of women. Yousof (1976) and Fazli and Husin (2020) researched *makyong*, revealing many stories and performances. In a greater lens, the roles of traditional women viewed from the lens of contestation space, power relations, and domestic roles are hardly understood.

In the context of international cultural studies, the present study responded to this gaping void, particularly at the Southeast Asian regional scale. It aimed to contribute significantly to the study of international traditional art contestation. In doing so, it employed critical ethnographic studies to explore the positions and roles of *ludruk* women, anchored in developing issues (Spradley, 1997; Madison, 2005). The concept of contestation space was engaged as an analytical framework to explore, analyse, and interpret the positions and

roles of women as actresses in traditional art performances. Furthermore, in the aspect of political-power relations, this study explored, read, analysed, and interpreted the relations of *ludruk* and *makyong* women with various authorities. By doing so, the study was aimed at capturing a nuanced understanding of the intersections between traditional art, gender, and political authorities in their respective regions.

The present study was conducted to discover the academic concepts and propositions concerning the existence of traditional women, which have not been thoroughly examined through the lens of their positions and roles in *ludruk* performances in Jember, Indonesia, and the traditional art of *makyong* in Malaysia. This line of inquiry affords strategic implications for strengthening *ludruk* and *makyong* communities.

This study was divided into three foci. First, it aimed to investigate the space for women's contestation and the performance of *ludruk* in the eastern regions of East Java, and the traditional art of *makyong* in Malaysia. Another area of investigation pertained to the identity transformation occurring in *ludruk* and *makyong* when faced with the ever-growing market tastes. Finally, the study sought to draw implications for the management of these traditional performing arts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study offers distinct viewpoints on traditional cultural practices by investigating *ludruk wetanan*, which is different from

*ludruk kulonan* (Taufiq, 2013). Meanwhile, the inquiry into *makyong* lends credence to revealing the underlying values of Malaysian traditions. These two areas of inquiry hold the potential to extend cultural studies in the Southeast Asian context.

The role of women in *ludruk* in eastern regions of East Java, especially Jember and its surroundings, is complex in that it overarches beyond providing space for art performances as it manifests the dynamics of ethical rules and socio-cultural position of *ludruk* women. From an ethical viewpoint, Mak Lilik, the leader of the Setia Kawan group, considered putting a man in a woman's role to be inappropriate. Pak Edi, the leader of Topeng Masa Baru Jember *ludruk*, even argued that involving men (travesty) would result in substantial economic waste (Taufiq, 2022; Taufiq, 2019). These ethical and economic considerations hold an impact on the involvement and roles of women in *ludruk*.

*Makyong* resembles other Southeast Asian traditional theatres. It showcases traditional dance drama from northern Malaysia, especially the state of Kelantan. This traditional performance has received extensive emphasis in research for more than four decades (Yusof, 1976; Pudentia, 2010; Fazli & Husin, 2020; Hardwick & Patricia, 2020). Hardwick and Patricia (2020) mentioned that *makyong* is a Malay dance drama that was once performed for entertainment and medicinal purposes. Included in the national exhibition of Malaysia's cultural heritage since the mid-1970s, *makyong* was declared a Masterpiece

of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005.

*Makyong* has existed for hundreds of years in the Malay world, especially among the Malay community in the state of Kelantan, Peninsular Malaysia (Sheppard, 1983). It can also be found in southern Thailand, as well as in Riau Islands and North Kalimantan in Indonesia (Tan & Shafii, 2021). *Makyong* combines all the elements of a stage performance, including acting, dancing, singing, musical instruments, special movements, costumes with fine jewellery, and comedy acts. According to UNESCO (2024), *makyong* is a form of traditional theatre performed both for entertainment and as part of therapeutic rituals, particularly in the case of *makyong main peteri*. Albeit its designation as part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), *makyong* encounters a paradoxical status in its home country, where it was formally banned in its place of origin, Kelantan. As a corollary, whether *makyong* manifests as a Malay cultural symbol for religious reasons is often debated in Malaysia.

Given this debate, research on *makyong* has become increasingly essential for traditional art studies in Southeast Asia, since such an inquiry affords potential insights into the relationship between *makyong* and other traditional arts in other regions. The present study was devoted to that objective by diving deep into the position and roles of women in *ludruk wetanan* and *makyong*. Particularly, it employed contestation space and power relations as the analytical lenses.

Studies concerning *ludruk* have thus far focused on *ludruk* performances in western regions of East Java, reporting *ludruk* as a treasure trove of traditional drama in East Java. Several related studies have explored various aspects of *ludruk*, including comedy and structure (Peacock, 1967), symbolic elements (Hefner, 1994), its language as the voice of the “little people” (Maryeni, 2002), innovations in the Arek community (Abdillah, 2009), adaptation to changing times (Supriyanto, 2018), and its development in Surabaya (Sumiyani, 2020).

Some of these studies have generally focused on the development of *ludruk* in western regions of East Java, namely among the Arek community, which includes Surabaya, Malang, Mojokerto, Sidoarjo, Jombang, and Lamongan. Meanwhile, not much research has been conducted in eastern regions of East Java. Among the few studies conducted in this underexplored region, Taufiq (2013) focused on postcolonial studies of *ludruk*, Taufiq and Sukatman (2012) explored the development strategy for *ludruk* in Eastern Java, and Taufiq (2013) documented the characteristics and strategic implications of *ludruk wetanan*. In addition, Taufiq and Sukatman (2014) revealed the adaptation strategy for facing the onslaught of the entertainment market industry, Taufiq, Husniah, and Siswanto (2019) documented the revitalisation of Setia Kawan, and Taufiq (2022) examined the reflection of power, performance characteristics, and development strategies surrounding *ludruk*.

By contrast, *makyong* has received sufficient attention in cultural studies. Yousof (1976), Pudentia (2010), Fazli and Husin (2020), and Hardwick and Patricia (2020) are some of the studies conducted in this area. These studies focused more on traditional *makyong* art as a performance structure and external penetration in political and religious fields. While Yousof (1976) and Fazli and Husin (2020) focused more on the performing arts dimension, Pudentia (2010) and Hardwick and Patricia (2020) tapped into the revitalisation and UNESCO recognition of *makyong*.

*Makyong* is intrinsically linked to women, as its name incorporates the term “*mak*,” an abbreviation of “*emak*,” which denotes a mother or a woman with children. Tan and Shafii (2021) clarified that “*makyong*” is associated with the word “*Mak Hyang*,” which refers to the spirit of rice. To ensure abundant rice harvests, the people of the past worshipped the spirit of the Rice Mother by performing dances and drama every season. These practices are believed to be the outsets that marked *makyong* offerings.

Tan and Shafii (2021) mentioned the existence of a record of a European trader invited to the palace of King Hijau, who ruled Patani in southern Thailand between 1585 and 1680. The trader stated that while he was in the palace, a “*commedye*” was performed by a group of women. The term “*commedye*” is like “*commedia dell’arte*,” an Italian word that refers to a group theatrical performance with stock characters who appear in each performance

(Britannica, 2024) with a different story. Stock characters, such as the King, Empress, and Governess, remain consistent in their roles and traits, differing only in their specific names.

Within the spectrum of traditional performing arts in Southeast Asia, Indonesia's *ludruk* and Malaysia's *makyong* need to be read, positioned, and interpreted through the lens of traditional women and the transformation of performance identity, shaped by the ever-growing collective society and market demand. In this context, the role of women in traditional performing arts—both in *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia—should be framed within a gender-sensitive perspective that promotes equal opportunity and broader access to participation in performances (Bettina & Helga, 2001; Mursih, 2018; Tamrin, 2024). This emphasis is particularly crucial given the prevailing patriarchal tendencies within both the internal management structures of *ludruk* and *makyong*, as well as the broader socio-cultural and political systems that shape and reinforce gender hierarchies in these traditional art forms.

In this context, the conventional drama performances—such as *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia—are generally insensitive toward gender justice issues. For example, women's involvement in these performances is always pushed to the margins with not much room for engagement in more important aspects such as performance management (Yang, 2022; Szostak, 2023). Therefore, paying heed

to the role performed by women in these conventional forms of art takes on critical scholarly significance and warrants proper scrutiny.

## METHODOLOGY

Embracing a critical ethnographic approach, this qualitative research aimed to discover the academic concepts and propositions regarding the phenomena of *ludruk* women in the Jember city of East Java, Indonesia, and the traditional art of *makyong* in Malaysia. Qualitative data in written and spoken forms were collected in words, sentences, and paragraphs. The data were analysed according to research needs (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2009). The research attempted to dismantle ideological, political, economic, and socio-cultural structures (Madison, 2005), while aiming to empower and guide marginalised groups (Madison, 2005; Creswell, 2008). The groups under scrutiny were women in *ludruk* and *makyong* communities. The *ludruk* community had been systematically marginalised by political, social, and economic dynamics (Yuliani, 2010; Lesmana, et.al, 2021; Ghajarieh et.al, 2023).

As marginalised groups, women in *ludruk* and *makyong* communities are worthy of careful investigation and interpretation to gain a thorough understanding of their complex strategic positions and roles. Specifically, the present study intended to explore the contestation and complex power relations, driven by the ideological structures, market preferences, and the performing arts themselves. This critical

ethnographic approach was carried out in two stages. First, the study used Spradley's (2007) traditional ethnographic approach to explain, analyse, and interpret the emic data of *ludruk* and *makyong* women. Second, a critical ethnographic analysis was operationalised by exploring, reading, analysing, and critically interpreting the phenomena involving women to reveal the network of ideological structures, markets, and performing arts (Sagrestano, 1992; Bettina & Helga, 2001; Madison, 2005; Creswell, 2008). This later stage sought to discover the existence, position, and strategic roles of women, as well as the contestation of space and power relations surrounding *ludruk* and *makyong*.

Data were sourced from two *ludruk* groups in Jember, namely Setia Kawan and Maharani. In addition, the fourth-generation heir to the traditional art of *makyong* in Malaysia was recruited. The data were gleaned using ethnographic interview techniques, a series of interviews that engaged in participatory conversation with ethnographic questions. Drawing on Spradley's (1997) typology of ethnographic questions, the study utilised: (a) descriptive questions to gather data expressed in the informants' language; (b) structural questions to uncover core elements of the informants' cultural knowledge; and (c) contrast questions to identify the distinctions made by informants in their cultural frameworks. Spradley's ethnographic interview technique was followed by Madison's (2005) critical ethnographic interview technique to critically investigate the roles and positions of women in the

aforementioned phenomena. By employing traditional and critical ethnographic methodologies, this study sought to generate a nuanced understanding of the intersectional challenges and opportunities faced by the two traditional art performances, especially by women who have been immersed in these arts. In this regard, the process of data triangulation is deemed essential. In this study, triangulation was conducted directly with key figures in the traditional *ludruk* performances of Setia Kawan and Maharani Jember, namely Ms. Wulan and Mr. Giman. For the traditional art of *makyong*, data triangulation was carried out with Mama Fatimah.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In exploring the phenomena involving traditional women in *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia, this ethnographic study has discovered two important findings. First, the significance of women in both performing arts is indicated not only by the number of actresses involved but also by their strategic positions and roles in the entire performance and its management. Their positions and roles are pivotal to the success of the performances. Second, the identity transformation associated with women in both arts is inevitable for the group leaders. In this case, this identity transformation denotes a dynamic discursive space bridging the ideology of traditional arts (values), actors, and shifting market preferences. Further details on the research findings are hereby presented. Table 1 shows the contestation of traditional women.



Table 1  
*The contestation of tradition women*

| Contestation of Tradition Women  | <i>Ludruk</i>  | <i>Makyong</i>   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| The existence of tradition women | There is a significant number of female ludruk players. In addition to the number, there is a strategic role position as a ludruk leader.  | The center of the show is women. Young professional girls are given big roles, choosing the stories.   |
| Identity transformation          | The transformation of ludruk identity is shown by actors, plays/stories, language on stage (Javanese and Madurese), and the flexibility of the performance influenced by the market. There is a negotiation between the ideology of art, the actors, and the market. | The transformation of Malay story identity is presented flexibly following market tastes. There is a meeting point between art ideology, actors, and the market. |

**The Existence of Women in *Ludruk* and *Makyong* Traditions**

***The Positions and Roles of Women in Ludruk and Makyong***

The contestation of traditional women is an appealing area of inquiry to better understand their roles on the stage (Anoegrajekti, 2016). This phenomenon is uniquely present in *ludruk* and *makyong*. In both performance traditions, women shoulder critical roles and positions not only in terms of numbers but also concerning their contribution on the stage.

In this regard, the existence of women can be interpreted from their positions and strategic roles in the performances. In terms of numbers, it is clear that women are dominant in both *ludruk* groups, in that a third of the players are women. There are 10 and 15 female players in Setia Kawan and Maharani, respectively. Below is an excerpt of the interview with *ludruk* practitioners from Setia Kawan.

Researcher: Forty, Ms. Wulan. How many are women?

Ms. Wulan: Out of 40, at least 10 are women. The total 40 includes the crew.  
Researcher: So, 10 women in total?  
Ms. Wulan: Actually, it’s not exactly 40, more or less 40. We’ve already got responses from 26.  
Researcher: So, how many? Not quite 40?  
Ms. Wulan: Not quite, it’s around 40.  
Researcher: Is 40 the total? What about the others? On average. Outside Bandalit? The other responses?  
Ms. Wulan: You mean the budget, Sir?  
Researcher: No, no, I mean the people.  
Ms. Wulan: It’s still the same, Sir.  
Researcher: How many women?  
Ms. Wulan: The women? Around 10. There are six here and four more, so around 10. On average, 10 people.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted with practitioners of the traditional *ludruk* art from the Setia Kawan group. The interview took place with the *ludruk* leader and deputy leader, Ms. Wulan and Mr. Slamet, on 28 May 2024, at the *ludruk* leader’s house in Jubung village, Jember, Indonesia.

The manager of Setia Kawan mentioned that *ludruk* involves players and *nayoga* totalling 40 people, of which 10 of the players are women. This number is quite large, considering women's involvement being seen as unusual. This is in stark contrast to western *ludruk*, in which only males are recruited (Taufiq, 2013). It means that in western *ludruk*, a male actor assumes a female character.

Therefore, having as many as 10 women in the *ludruk* performance is deemed unusual, especially considering the division of positions and roles between genders. The positions and roles, for example, start from being a *rema* dancer (*remong*), a comedian, an actor in the story, or even a singing artist who becomes an inseparable part of the performance. These diverse roles strongly pronounce the prominence of women in the performances. Notably, even the strategic and multifunctional position of the *ludruk* leader is occupied by a woman. The manager, Ms. Wulan, apart from being a leader, is also a dancer and an actor. This cements the central positions of women in *ludruk* not only in terms of the roles they shoulder but also concerning the complexity and versatility of their contributions (Putri & Anzari, 2021). Below is an excerpt of the interview with Maharani *ludruk* practitioners, offering further insights into these dynamics.

Researcher: Oh, there are men too. But mostly women? How many women?  
 Mr. Gimán: Around 15.  
 Researcher: And the men?

Mr. Gimán: Around 20. Altogether, it's about 50 people.  
 Researcher: Oh, total? Including the *nayoga*?  
 Mr. Gimán: Yes.  
 Researcher: Including the *nayoga*, it's 50. The 15 women, what about their ages, Sir?  
 Mr. Gimán: Yes.  
 Researcher: Their ages? The age range of those 15 women?  
 Mr. Gimán: The ages, well, for the motherly roles, some are 40.  
 Researcher: The oldest is how old?  
 Mr. Gimán: Around 40.  
 Researcher: The youngest?  
 Ms. Fitri: The youngest? Oh, those would be the performers. Some are still in school.  
 Researcher: In school? Middle school?  
 Ms. Fitri: High school.  
 Researcher: High school. What grade?  
 Ms. Fitri: 12th grade.

The same practice is evident in the Maharani group, in which a total of 50 performers partake and 15 of them are women. In Maharani, women are divided into several positions and roles, including a *rema* dancer (*remong*), a comedian, an actress, and a singer. This accentuates the critical contribution of women in *ludruk* performances in eastern Indonesia (Taufiq, 2022).

Usually, younger players from high school with appealing beauty are recruited as singers. These selection criteria aim to enhance the attractiveness and lure of the performance. The aesthetic elements are carefully designed to create an enjoyable experience for the audience, who predominantly consist of rural residents engaged in agricultural livelihoods. Market



considerations by the leader are a key component. Market demand determines the appearance and performance on the stage. In that context, the female body is sensually portrayed to impress the viewers, primarily to fascinate the audience and ensure commercial viability (Mursih, 2018). Below is the excerpt from an interview that captures similar orientations in *makyong* performances.

Researcher: In a *makyong* performance, how many actors are usually involved?  
Mama Fatimah: Actually, it depends on the location and the scale of the performance. For a large event, it involves many people. For smaller events, there are usually 10 actors (excluding the musicians). So, the total is around 14.  
Researcher: Typically, what’s the maximum number?  
For instance, on a large stage?  
Mama Fatimah: It can go up to six musicians. But at the very least, there’s one person playing three instruments.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted with Mama Fatimah, whose full name is Mama Fatimah Abdullah. She is a fourth-generation practitioner of the traditional *makyong* art from Kelantan, Malaysia. The interview took place on 18 October 2024 at ASWARA in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The informant was Mama Fatimah, the heir, practitioner, and instructor of the *makyong* art at National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan, ASWARA), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She mentioned that the number of performers in *makyong* depends on the venue and scale of the performance. In this case, the bigger the event, the more players are recruited. For small events, *makyong* is usually performed with around 14 players. Regardless of the performance scale, women are at the centre of *makyong*.

Sheppard (1983) argues that *makyong* usually consists of four main (senior) female actors, who play the characters of King, Hero, Empress, and Heroine, along with young women or girls as supporting characters. In the 19th century and earlier, when *makyong* was under the patronage of the king and was performed for entertainment in the palace, the group performing the “overture” of the *Mengadap Rebab* dance consisted of girls no older than 17. In addition to possessing melodious voices and captivating appearances, these performers displayed exceptional discipline and mastery of their craft, developed through rigorous training for a period of at least two years before their stage debut. This extensive preparatory process was particularly critical for the main characters, even the young performers considered to have reached a professional status. Experienced players were usually allowed to lead the Facing Fiddle dance, and they were responsible for selecting the narratives for their group’s performance.

Despite the strict training and role distribution, there remains flexibility in the management of the *makyong* group to remain responsive to market demand. Viewers or the public in general need to be taken into account by the leader or manager. As one of the characteristics of traditional arts, flexibility turns out to be the key to keeping traditional performances attractive and ever-lasting (Rachma & Rahmi, 2019).

Furthermore, the flexibility of organising *makyong* performances is based on the traditional belief that everything is subject to discussion and therefore changes. Flexibility is parallel to the popularity of the performance, achieved by maintaining public interest. This certainly assumes an intersection between *makyong* actors and public interest. In this regard, the existence of the *makyong* art is not only interpreted from its internal capacity as a traditional performing art but also determined by its resonance with the market, or the collective society supporting *makyong*. This notion of market orientation also applies to *ludruk* performances (Rachma & Rahmi, 2019; Taufiq, 2022).

## Identity Transformation in Ludruk and Makyong Performances

### *Interpreting the Relations of Ideology, Market, and Art Performances*

In relation to the encounter between traditional performing arts and the market as its supporting force, *ludruk* and *makyong* seem to have transformed to maintain their existence and continuity. The transformation plays a strategic function that drives the

performance structure and helps establish a management system to suit the market demand (Labaronne & Trondle, 2020).

Such an adaption holds a pivotal role in generating positive outcomes. It extends beyond mere performance on the stage to include the ability to communicate with the market and manage the performers' talents. This dual focus ensures the sustainability and relevance of traditional art forms in contemporary settings. The interview excerpt below documents the transformation of the two *ludruk* groups and the *makyong* group. The interview was conducted with the leader and deputy leader of Setia Kawan.

Researcher: Does that mean all females participate?

Mr. Slamet: Yes, I take on all those roles—performing the *remong* dance, participating in contests, and storytelling, especially when there are jokes.

Mr. Slamet: For example, during a contest, there's a master of ceremonies who organises it. But it's different for the *gamelan* music. It's like being an artist, you know? Like a performer. But honestly, I don't enjoy it much.

Researcher: Oh, like a fashion contest? What kind of clothes are worn in these contests?

Ms. Wulan: Clothes like those worn by artists. But I don't wear them often because I don't like them.

Researcher: And the participants are women? How old are they?

Ms. Wulan: Mostly high school girls.

Researcher: High school girls, right? Do they need to be beautiful?

Ms. Wulan: Not necessarily, actually. But they should be well-groomed and look beautiful. For events like that, it's important to appear beautiful.

Researcher: What kind of contests are these? How many participants are there?

Ms. Wulan: Usually, there are about eight participants.

Researcher: How long does each contest last?

Ms. Wulan: The contests usually focus on performances—each participant sings one by one. And their costumes are matched to their performances.

Researcher: So, they wear tailored outfits and sing? Is that what's called a contest? Do they sing Banyuwangian, *dangdut*, or Osing songs?

Ms. Wulan: It depends on the audience's request. Sometimes someone starts singing, and then it transitions into a *ludruk* performance. It's all part of the sound art—whether it's singing, joking, or storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

For Setia Kawan, performance transformation is unavoidable. The leader

needs to transform the performance by adapting to the shifting tastes of society or the market representing the collective society of *ludruk*. The adaptation is manifested in two things, namely, the contest and songs (Taufiq, 2022). First, it involves the contest procession in the structure of *ludruk*. Another adaptation is the inclusion of local songs, generally comprising Banyuwangian or Osingese songs, Javanese *campursari* songs, and even *dangdut* songs for example.

The adaptation to market tastes only shows the external aspect of the performance. Through a greater lens, the story in *ludruk* and its expression through language embodies more intrinsic and fundamental characteristics. This is shown by the plays that reflect local cultures. The *Sogol* and *Babad Tanah Jember* are two distinct plays typical of Jemberese *ludruk*. The use of flexible languages following market trends is another characteristic, as evident in the use of Javanese or Madurese, or even the use of both languages in harmony. This phenomenon further substantiates the identity transformation of *ludruk* in the eastern regions of East Java. The interview excerpt below sheds light on this artistic adaptation.

Researcher: All women?

Mr. Gimán: There are men too, playing male roles.

Researcher: Oh, so are all the members women? Are there any men?

Mr. Gimán: Yes, there are.

Researcher: I see. According to you, what's the sequence like? The order of a *ludruk* performance?

<sup>3</sup> The interview with Ms. Wulan, the leader of Setia Kawan in Jember, was conducted on 28 May 2024.

Mr. Gimán: First, if there are technical plays, it starts with *Burung Garuda*.  
Researcher: So, *Burung Garuda* is always performed, right?  
Mr. Gimán: Yes, and then comes *remong*.  
Researcher: *Remong*, and then?  
Mr. Gimán: Then the artist performance contest.  
Researcher: Artists, singing, various things. And then?  
Mr. Gimán: Then comedy. Storytelling.  
Researcher: In the past, there weren't contests, right?  
Mr. Gimán: That's right.  
Researcher: There weren't contests before. Because it follows the trends. The audience now demands contests. So, there are contests. The contests are purely singing, right?  
Mr. Gimán: Yes, singing.

Similar transformations also emerged in the Maharani group. The leader, Mr. Gimán, was required to initiate the transformation, modifying the performance structure and technical elements to be showcased on stage (Indrayuda & Azrul, 2022). Significant transformation was captured in terms of the performance structure. For example, the traditional performance previously began with the *rema* dance as an opening, followed by the recital of *jula-juli*, interspersed with jokes, storytelling, and a closing segment. The recent structure has developed to suit market tastes. The opening part is carried out with the Garuda bird game, followed by *remong*, a contest of artist performances, jokes, stories, and closing.

This process shows that serious measures have been taken in both the management and

the performance of *ludruk* in order to satisfy market demands (Heras & Tàbara, 2014). *Ludruk* leaders and players, along with the market, grow a collective awareness, echoing that adaptation to public tastes is inevitable. This adaptability highlights the ability of traditional *ludruk* performers to sustain their existence by balancing the preservation of artistic identity, rooted in the ideological foundations of *ludruk* arts, with the orientation to reach economic gains. This harmony helps to ascertain that *ludruk* not only keeps its cultural essence intact but also supports the economic orientation of its performers. These findings are also captured in the interview with Mama Fatimah, a *makyong* actor and guru in Malaysia.

Researcher: So, what are the stages of a *makyong* performance?  
Mama Fatimah: It's flexible, depending on the request. Some request shorter performances, while others prefer longer ones.  
Researcher: How long is a single act typically performed?  
From after *Isya* ' until *Subuh* (the early morning prayer in Islam, which is performed before dawn)?  
Mama Fatimah: No, the maximum is two and a half hours. In the past, it was longer—from *Isya* ' until midnight, followed by dancing afterward.  
Researcher: The dancing would last until *Subuh*?  
Mama Fatimah: No.

- Researcher: Because in Java, performances sometimes last until *Subuh*.
- Mama Fatimah: Performances that last until early morning are *main teri*, usually for healing rituals.
- Researcher: So that's a different type of performance from *makyong*?
- Mama Fatimah: It's still *makyong*.
- Researcher: So, there's a special type of *makyong* depending on its purpose?
- Researcher: Does that mean what you're teaching here is performance-based *makyong*, not the healing one?
- Mama Fatimah: No, it's not possible. The healing *makyong* is used to treat astral-related issues. Usually, *main teri* will possess the sick person to identify the illness.
- Researcher: Is *makyong* performance still popular with audiences today?
- Mama Fatimah: Very popular. From the 2000s until now, it's still thriving. Every year, new performance productions come out. There's always a show.<sup>4</sup>

In parallel with the transformation of *ludruk* performances, *makyong* has also undergone a transformation. The traditional

art of *makyong* has evolved in response to the needs and expectations of its collective society. One of the pivotal indications is how the leaders of *makyong* initiate the alignment with market demands to fit contemporary expectations and constraints, ensuring their continued relevance in the modern cultural landscape. There are at least two things which correspond to this adaptation. First, regarding the duration of the performance, *makyong* originally began after the *Isya* ' prayer, continuing until midnight. The adaptation marks a shift to performances lasting only 2 to 3 hours each. In fact, Mama Fatimah firmly stated a maximum was capped at 2.5 hours. The term *Isya* ' indicates the time for Muslims to pray at around 8.30 p.m. daily. The other adaptation deals with the overall performance duration, which eventually affects the performance structure. This generally consists of songs, dances, and stories told in the form of traditional drama games.

These changes, encompassing both the management and the structure of performances, portray the measures to adapt the performances to market demands and keep them flourishing. Adaptability in managing *makyong* is determined by the ability to initiate and maintain the development of such a traditional art (Suharto, 2019; Tan & Shafii, 2021). The *makyong* traditional art also demonstrates identity transformation. Far from being outdated or inflexible, *makyong* challenges the commonly held belief that traditional arts are antiquated or intrinsically rigid.

<sup>4</sup> The interview with Mama Fatimah Abdullah, a practitioner and teacher of *makyong*, was conducted on 18 October 2024 in Kuala Lumpur.

This adaptation also distinguishes two models of *makyong* performance: *makyong* as a folk entertainment art and *makyong* as a medicinal practice, known as *makyong manteri*. According to Mama Fatimah, *makyong manteri* is the traditional art of *makyong* performed to treat individuals afflicted by disturbances from astral entities. Hence, this model involves prayers or mantras, which are absent from *ludruk* performances. *Ludruk* solely serves as an entertainment art form for the marginalised or working-class community, providing a platform to express and channel their anxieties through performances rich in humour and entertainment. Therefore, folk jokes or comedy are very popular with this group. The comedy or dialogues involved in *ludruk* stories may engage criticism and satire directed at the viewers or even powerful figures among them. This unique segment aims to reflect the lives of common people and is often performed during the *Jula-Juli* recital (Setiawan, 2021).

These findings document that, apart from the on-stage performance of *ludruk* and *makyong*, a significant tension exists between the ideological space of traditional art and the evolving demands of contemporary society (Wihendar et al., 2023). These traditional arts have to be coherent with realities, while simultaneously navigating the need to transform to align with collective societal awareness and market preferences. This transformation gradually opens up the dialogue and new space to satisfy the ever-evolving market demands. In consequence, the intersections

of the ideological foundations of traditional arts, the performers' agency, and the shifting market demands serve as the driving forces for performance transformation.

The theoretical contributions present a holistic perspective to the dynamics of existence and transformation of traditional arts—i.e., *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia—under the backdrop of the dynamics of artistic ideology, performers, and market forces. Such theories have the potential to inform practical applications, particularly in strengthening, building, and enriching arts education curricula (Taufiq et al., 2024). This is especially relevant to the teaching of classical dramatic art, and performing art in general, at school and tertiary levels.

## CONCLUSION

Grounded in the findings, the study highlights the existence, identity, and identity transformation of the traditional arts of *ludruk* in Indonesia and *makyong* in Malaysia, revealing similar phenomena and tendencies. First, the existence of these traditional arts is sustained through flexible management practices. Flexibility in the management of *ludruk* and *makyong* serves as a key principle, ensuring their continuity and adaptability. Second, regarding identity transformation, the structure of these performances is not rigid but rather dialogical, allowing for interaction with the collective society, which is composed of a dynamic market with evolving tastes. While certain elements, such as the repertoire of stories, remain unchanged in both *ludruk*



and *makyong*, a dialogical space emerges as a point of convergence between the ideological dimensions of traditional art, the performers, and the market representing the collective society's changing preferences.

This study's findings are specific to the traditional arts of *ludruk* and *makyong* while focusing on the contested space of performance. The findings address issues of existence and the interpretation of identity transformation within these traditional art forms, positioning them as dynamic entities that negotiate between tradition and contemporary societal demands.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our gratitude to the Research and Community Service Institute (LP2M) of the University of Jember for their full support of this research through the 2024 International Collaboration Research Grant, with grant number SK 3158/UN25.3.1/LT/2024.

## DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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