

The Hidden Messages within Laesan Traditional Performance in Lasem, Central Java

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This paper discusses *laesan*, an Indonesian traditional performance, which originates from Lasem in Central Java, Indonesia. It aims to uncover the hidden messages of the *laesan* through the interaction between *laes*¹, as the dancer who falls into a trance, and the scenes in *laesan*, namely *ngenuwun*, *kurungan*, *dolanan*, *pengobatan*, *pamitan*, and *penutupan*². This qualitative study uses a phenomenology approach, as a research design. The data was collected through observations and interviews, completing the analysis. The findings present that the *laesan* is not merely a traditional performance, but a symbol of balance and simplicity that reveals through the messages which relate it to the human life cycle. It is expected that this study could add to the richness of Lasem cultural heritage. Moreover, the traditional performance of *laesan* ensures the continuation, preservation and maintenance of Lasem cultural component through times.

Keywords: *Laesan, Lasem, Traditional performance, Hidden messages.*

Introduction

Messages are a part of human life, which are conveyed through a medium. Every message finds its way to convey its meaning through any available medium. It spreads quickly within the medium, and to anyone who is able to sense it. Messages are transmitted from one place to another, and our task is to find out what they are and where they are heading. Depending on its value, a message can be more significant than its medium of transmission. Cassone (2009)

¹ The *laesan* is a traditional Javanese performance, and *laes* is the *laesan* dancer.

² These words are Javanese terminologies - *Ngenuwun* (opening), *Kurungan* (the cage), *Dolanan* (playing), *Pengobatan* (healing), *Pamitan* (farewell), and *Penutupan* (closing).

classifies a message as content, and medium as a carrier. Sometimes, the message can also be the medium itself. The medium may look light, however, the message is heavy. This statement is in line with the embodiment of the *laesan*, one of the creative and humble traditional performances from Lasem, a small area on the north coast of the Rembang Regency in Central Java, Indonesia. Lasem was formerly an important region and a significant port in Central Java under the greatest Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire. This was proven by the visit of Sri Rajasanagara — also known as Hayam Wuruk, a supreme leader of the empire — to Lasem in 1354 (Suroyo, 1994; Darmayanti et al., 2019 & 2020). During the fifteenth and sixteenth century, when Islam entered Java, the northern coast area, including Lasem, were influenced. The expansion of Islam in Java was more an assimilative process than a revolutionary process. Therefore, it resulted in syncretism and localisation between Hinduism-Buddhism, as previous beliefs and Islamic elements, forming the indigenous matrix of Javanese culture. Moreover, the early Islamisation of Java, which was dominated by Sufi Islam, supported traditional performing arts that could endure and develop. This was due to their beliefs on the power of music as a conduit for the union of man with God (Sumarsam, 1995: 6). Consequently, although Islam is mostly practised in Lasem, several traditional ceremonies, rituals, and performing arts are still carried out today with the influence of previous beliefs. One of which is *laesan*, which contains a hidden message concerning human life.

Despite the value in the *laesan*, this traditional performance is threatened with extinction, and is rarely seen. Subsequently, the performance is almost unknown to the broader community. From a tourism perspective, the unpredictable duration of the show is assumed to be the reason for a lack of enthusiasm from tourists. However, this unpredictability should be seen as an advantage, and not a disadvantage, because the value of the *laesan*'s wisdom cannot be found in other shows. The performance itself is not solely connected to the aesthetic value; it also involves all other senses and feelings. Another cause for the 'rarely seen' *laesan* performance is because of political and religious issues, which have negatively impacted the performance. The *laesan* was once banned because it was considered to be related to the prohibited party at the time, and was incompatible with Islamic teachings (Unjiya, 2014).

It is difficult to find an exact history of the *laesan*, especially due to a lack of written records. However, the history of this performance can still be obtained from the local people, the dancers and singers who received a verbal history from previous generations. Unjiya (2014) noted that the *laesan* has been in existence since the fifteenth century and has remained popular among the local community. However, the incoming New Order Government outlawed the *laesan* because it was used in the political propaganda of the communist party. Umar (2017) classified the journey of the *laesan* within the time range of 1940–1987, and into three distinct periods. The first period was the development period, which took part from 1940–1969. It was followed by the vacuity period, which occurred from 1970–1986, and finally, the revitalisation period in 1987. During the third and final period, *laesan* experienced a transformation into ritualistic and aesthetic performances of traditional festivals. This is because during the

development period, *laesan* only served as a folk art. Whereas, in the vacuity period, there was never a *laesan* performance due to the stigma from the *santri*³, who declared that the performance is illegal. Notwithstanding, the knowledge of this traditional performance is still limited. Therefore, this study is important, as it might extend the message to a broader audience.

Material and Methods

Previous studies by local scholars and researchers have mostly focussed upon a male dancer who dances in a trance because the angel (*bidadari*) spirit enters his body. This story has been known for a long time, as it was mentioned in an old magazine published in 1955, named *Bahasa and Budaya*: "... *Djika sekiranja laesan ternjata sudah kerasukan roh, maka dibukalah kurunganja...*" (If the dancer is now in trance by a spirit, then the cage is opened). Kusumastuti (2006) identified the symbolic relationship between *laesan* players and viewers. A better understanding of the relationship was further explained by Kusumastuti in 2009. Furthermore, Anggrahita et al. (2016) discussed the functions and conflicts inherent in *laesan* performance. Although these previous studies have covered certain areas in the *laesan*, there has been no discussion about the messages within the performance, and how these messages are delivered to the *laesan* audience. Therefore, this study fills the research gap by studying prior records, including photographs and videos, and exploring and experiencing every scene, including the chant lyrics in this performance. Based upon this, the research question has been formulated to discuss how *laesan* performance creates and conveys the messages of human life.

The approach adopted for this study is qualitative, which means exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups. The process of research involves collecting data in the participants' setting, and making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014). The authors were the spectators of a few performances specifically on the 29th September 2018 around 7:30 pm and conducted a few in-depth interviews using Indonesian and Javanese languages with the *laesan* experts and *laesan* performers on 19th, 23rd, 29th September and 1st October 2018. The participants were Mr. Ngalim, 84 years old; Mr. Yon Suprayoga, 60 years old; Mr. Ernantoro, and Mr. Moh Hatta, both who were 59 years old. Most of the interviews were conducted at Mr Suprayoga's house in the Soditan Village of the Lasem District, Rembang Regency, Central Java. Mr Suprayoga is an expert in the *laesan* and sometimes participates as a player. The only interview not to occur at this location was the interview with Mr. Ngalim, which took place at his house in the Soditan Village. A separate interview regarding the dancers' experience was conducted with Mr. Ripto, who is 46 years old, at the *laesan* performance venue. He is a talented *laesan* dancer who performs a daily activity as a pedicab driver. To support the findings, secondary data sources, such as magazines and academic reports, were also used. In an effort to obtain a deeper understanding, present a new perspective in observing, and unveil the messages of human life which rest behind the *laesan*, as the cultural heritage of Lasem, the authors applied a phenomenology approach. Through

³ A student of Islamic boarding school in Indonesia known as *Pesantren*.

phenomenology, the authors could excavate human experience, specifically in terms of persons and groups in particular places, situations, and historical moments. Phenomenology also serves to remind us of the significance of the full range of human experience, and helps to comprehend human behaviour in its fullness (Seamon, 2008; Stefanovic, 2014). Based on the explanation, this study is expected to enrich the value of human experience, local wisdom, and the nation's identity.

The Components of the *Laesan*

The laesan is performed by at least eleven men, and each person has a role. There is a dancer (*laes*), dancer's bodyguard (*cantrik*), *laesan* controller (*pawang*), four singers (*penembang*), and four hand drummers (*penabuh*). If the performance consists of men only, it is known as *laesan*, and if it is performed by only women, it is called *Sintren* (Koentjaraningrat, 1993). The term '*laesan*' comes from the word, '*laes*', which means 'empty' (*hampa*) or 'dead' in Javanese, and the end of the word, '*an*', means 'as if' (*seolah-olah*). Based on this explanation, *laesan* means 'dead-alive' (Poerwadarminta, 1983). *The laesan* is usually performed at night in an open space and it involves four components, which individually play an important role and are closely related to one another. The components are: (1) the players; (2) the properties, which consist of *kurungan*, *kemenyan*, *sesajen*, *nyiru*, and *sapu*⁴, as detailed in Table 1; and (3) the musical components, which are grouped into two. Firstly, the musical instruments are made of different sizes of bamboos called *bumbung*, and *jun*, which is a form of clay jug. Pictures and definitions are presented in Table 2. Secondly, the *laesan*'s chanting is written in Javanese that is sung in simple repetitive tones, which resemble a *jampi-jampi*⁵ or spells. It also reflects the beautiful feeling and meaning of life. In 1955, *Bahasa dan Budaja* magazine mentioned that the *laesan*'s chants can be used to summon occult spirits: "*Njanji-njanjian tersebut di atas itu dipergunakan untuk memanggil sesuatu roh gaib, agar merasuk ke dalam jiwa orang jang dijadikan laes*" (These songs are used to summon an invisible spirit so that it will penetrate the soul of the person who is made *laes*). The *laesan* has 25 types of chantings and rhythm, which are divided into four main themes: friendship, romance, satire, and games. However, not all chants are sung during the show due to the comfort of the performers and audiences. The essential part of the *laesan*'s chanting is the lyric. It is believed that before a chant was made, it was preceded by special rituals (Ngalim, personal communication, September 23, 2018). Last, but not least, is *Penonton*, which refers to the audiences that support the performance in becoming livelier.

⁴ *Kurungan* means the cage that usually made from bamboo; *kemenyan* is an incense; *sesajen* is known as the offering presented to appease or cajole the invisible or spiritual beings (Mulder, 2005); *nyiru* is the circle bamboo trays, and *sapu* is broom that used in the performance (*dolanan* scene).

⁵ A text of spells with notes on various topic.

Table 1: The Properties in the Laesan Performance

Laesan's Properties	
<p>1. <i>Kurungan:</i></p> 	<p>A bamboo cage that is covered by two layers of white fabric called <i>kain mori</i>. The cage is used as contemplation, conversation, and a bargaining space between the dancer (<i>laes</i>), <i>cantrik</i>, <i>bidadari</i>, and <i>Pangeran</i>⁶.</p>
<p>2. <i>Kemenyan:</i></p> 	<p>It is normally kept in a cage with the goal of being a dancer's charm. It also acts as a proponent of strength and tranquillity in the cage and inspires all components of the show. In classical performances, incense is seen as an 'impetus' to all the components of the performance, especially the dancer. It can also be a charm that invites spirits to come and dance during the performance.</p>
<p>3. <i>Sesajen:</i></p> 	<p>The offering presented to appease or cajole the invisible or spiritual beings (Mulder, 2005). However, findings from the interview conducted with Mr Suprayoga in September 2018 revealed that <i>laesan</i> can be successful without an offering. Music and songs can also serve as an influence. The offering usually consists of a special banana called <i>Pisang mas</i>⁷. and three variations of flower in different colours, one of which must be the kemuning flower (<i>Murraya paniculata</i>). Kemuning is believed to repel the evil power of magic and has many health benefits. According to the herbal expert Wijayakusuma (2000), this flower contains the same nutrients as various medicines. Since the offering can provide various benefits to everyone, in treatment scenes (<i>pengobatan</i>) the flower is given to the audience as selected by <i>laes</i>.</p>

⁶ *Cantrik* is known as the dancer's bodyguard, while *bidadari* is the name for the manifestation of an angel, and *Pangeran* is the term for God for the Javanese people.

⁷ *Pisang Mas* is translated from Indonesian language as golden banana. This variety is botanically classified as *Musa acuminata*, also known as Lady Finger bananas.

4. *Nyiru and Sapu:*



The circle bamboo trays (*nyiru or nampan*) and brooms (*sapu*) are used in the play scene (*dolanan*). *Nyiru* is used for playing the sale of gambir (*ador gambir*). Gambir is a known type of plant with the scientific name *uncaria gambir*. The broom is used for playing *jaran dawuk* (unseen or magical horse), known in West Java as *kuda lumping*. Each play has different music and chants.

Table 2: The Laesan’s Musical Instruments

Laesan’s Musical Instruments	How to Play
<p>1. <i>Bambung</i></p>  <p>The <i>bambung</i> made of bamboo are beaten on a stone, creating different tones and a special rhythm.</p>	
<p>2 <i>Jun and Sendal</i></p>  <p>A special round black vessel made of baked clay with a slightly flared neck and rounded bottom. They are of two sizes that produce</p>	

different tones when beaten with rubber slippers, which local people called *sendal*.

The Old Art Performance of the Laesan

The ancient values of *laesan* can be seen from simple musical instruments made of bamboo (*bumbung*), which are rich in creativity. This type of instrument has been used in the traditional performance for many years (Yon Suprayoga, personal communication, October 1, 2018), with old Javanese literature frequently mentioning it. A passage from the sixteenth century poem called, *Malat*, mentions this musical instrument made of bamboo and named *guntang*, as a bamboo zither instrument (Zoetmulder, 1974: 154). This instrument, which is still used in Bali, in Indonesia, has a similar shape to the *bumbung* that is used in the *laesan* performance.

In *laesan* traditional performance, the musical instruments result in tones called *selendro* or *slendro*. These tones are often found in Javanese ensemble music. *Slendro* has several different tones called *ji*, *lo*, *lu*, *mo*, and *nem*, while tone *pat* is hidden or eliminated⁸. The term *slendro* arose in the eighth century and comes from the name, 'Sailendra', the ruler of the Medang and Sriwijaya Kingdom. *Slendro* was allegedly brought to Sriwijaya by a Mahayana-Buddhist priest from Gandhara, in India, and was later developed to Java and Bali (Kunst, 1949; Sumarsam, 1995). Other ancient tales based on historical background stated that the performance was often an entertaining performance when Prince Diponegoro's army was resting. After Prince Diponegoro and his troops were captured by the Dutch around 1830, the *laesan* performance was no longer performed. However, there was a soldier who was able to escape to Cirebon, West Java. He created a similar performance, but it was played by women. The costumes used were more decorative and had a definite show time known as *Sintren* (Ernantoro & Yon Suprayoga, personal communication, September 19, 2018).

Laesan: The Message of the Human Life Cycle

Every movement in each *laesan*'s scene was accompanied by a unique musical rhythm and meaningful poetic chants. The performance incited curiosity and raised a lot of questions. Through self-experience, the author explored the messages beyond every scene of the performance. During the performance, the author experienced various feelings. The author's attention was first drawn to the bamboo torch, which was installed at every corner of the performance area. As a reflective practioners, the author's heartbeat pounded harder, causing an impatience during the wait for the performance to begin. At 8.00 pm, the musical instruments started to produce a repetitive rhythm that 'invited' people to come and join the show and for the audience to gather around.

⁸ Representation of musical scales derived from the abbreviation of Javanese numerals; *ji* is from *siji* (one - Do), *ro* is from *loro* (two - Re), *lu* is from *telu* (three - Mi), *pat* is from *papat* (four - Fa), *mo* is from *limo* (five - Sol), and *nem* is from *enem* (six - La).

The *laesan* performance features six scenes, namely *Ngenuwun* (opening), *Kurungan* (the cage), *Dolanan* (playing), *Pengobatan* (healing), *Pamitan* (farewell), and *Penutupan* (closing). Each scene possessed a variety of meanings to be deciphered from the Javanese chant lyrics. The details are shown in Table 3. In the first scene, the chant entitled, *Ela Elo*, as the opening of the *laesan*, narrates a particular story, and the beginning of the lyric was changed from *Ela Elo Lailolah* to *Lailaha Illallah*. This change was the initiative of Yon Suprayoga to respond to *laesan*'s performance refusal by Lasem society, which is dominated by Muslims. They believe that the opening lyrics do not represent Islam. The change was also an attempt to eliminate the negative stigma towards the show (Yon Suprayoga & Ernantoro, personal communication, 19 September 2018). Eventually, after the change in 1998, the *laesan* gave its first performance within the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) area in Lasem.

Table 3: Scenes and Chants in the Laesan

Scenes	Javanese Chants and English Translations
1. <i>Ngenuwun</i>	<p>Ela – Elo:</p> <p><i>Lailaha Illallah Muhammadur Rasullallah, pangerane gawe laes haa...</i></p> <p>Translation: There is no deity, but God Muhammad is the messenger of God, God will make laes (in trance dancer).</p>
2. <i>Kurungan</i>	<p>Banda Nira:</p> <p><i>Uculno Banda Nira iki sari laes, dunung ngala dunung x2. Laes sing ucul li bahu kiwo kejobo pangeran iro sari laes.</i></p> <p>Translation: <i>Laes</i> can untie the rope, <i>laes</i> searches for understanding (repeated twice). <i>Laes</i> cannot be surrendered except to pangeran (God).</p>
3. <i>Dolanan:</i>	<p>Pencak Silat:</p> <p><i>Santri ne ajar pencak</i></p> <p>Translation: The muslim man teaching pencak (martial art).</p> <p>Jaran Dawuk:</p> <p><i>Jaran ne jaran dawuk x2, Jaran ne mbo Srinawuk</i></p> <p>Translation: The unseen horse (repeated twice), the horse of Madam Srinawuk.</p> <p>Ador Gambir:</p> <p><i>Santri ne ador gambir</i></p> <p>Translation: The muslim man selling a gambir.</p>
4. <i>Pengobatan</i>	<p>Luru O Sintren:</p> <p><i>Luru O Sintren, Sintren ne widodari, mambu kembang kelayungan, kembang putro Laesan, Widodari tumuruno sing ngenjingi awak iro</i></p>

Translation: Looking for *sintren* (female dancer), the *sintren* is an angel that smells like flowers, the flower of the *Laesan*'s man, the angel comes down and comes into your body.

5. *Pamitan*

Kembang Jamur:

Bang, kembang jamur widodari bade kundor x2.. Kundor pisan widodari go laesan

Translation: The angel is willing to go home (repeated)... really wants to go home, the angel away from *laesan*.

6. *Penutupan*

Loro Tangis:

Loro tangis layung-layung x2... Loro ne wong wedi mati sopo biso ngeling no kejobo pangeran iro haa...

Translation: The painful cry (repeated)... the pain of people who fear death, who can remind you except your God.

In *laesan*, music and chants are the keys to a successful performance because they influence the storyline. The dance moves depend upon the melodiousness of the sound of music and the voices of the singers. It creates emotional feelings among the audience and performers, especially, the dancer, and the angel (*bidadari*) within him. The better the music and voices of the singers, the happier the *laes*, and the performance (Yon, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The *laes* gracefully sways when the singer and the audience repeatedly shout a Javanese word, '*kewat*' (meaning: flirty; *genit* in Indonesian). Although the *laes* is a man, he displays effeminate dance movements that are gentle and delicate. These movements raise a question in the author's mind about why the *bidadari* chooses and influences the *laes*? What kind of message does the *bidadari* want to convey to the audience? Why invite her from another world when we can still do it in the real world? This causes the author to immediately think back and find answers to all the questions. In reality, we have many questions from various moments in our lives, whether they are happy or sad. We cannot choose the moments, and sometimes we need to go through them, without asking questions. Life often involves challenges and events that cannot be predicted, but an interpretation is needed to gain wisdom about life. This is in line with the variety of the *laesan*'s scenes, where there are a number of challenges and unpredictable moments, which could be thrilling, pleasant or sad, and all of this happens without planning.

The following explanations provide a better enlightenment regarding the message of life in each *laesan* scene:

- 1) The lyrics, '*Ela-Elo*', in the opening (*ngenuwun*) scene contain a message that the performance can take place with Allah's permission, as only he can make it possible. The Figure 1 shows the first scene, depicting the *laes* in a sitting position with his body tied by using a rope, while he is conscious.



Figure 1. The First Scene of the Laesan: *Ngenuwun*
Source: Author's collection, 2018

- 2) In the next scene (*kurungan*), the *cantrik* covered the *laes* with a cage, as the chant of *Banda Nira* was sung, as pictured in Figure 2. The lyric of the chant means that letting go of the rope can only happen with God's permission. Inside the cage, the *laes* unties the rope that represents various problems, and when the knot is released, life becomes more pleasant. However, the meaning can also be interpreted from another perspective. Ernantoro (personal communication, September 19, 2018), an expert of *laesan* performance said, "The cage symbolises a mother's womb, and the effort to untie the rope represents the struggle and the survival within the womb". After being 'born into the world', as he successfully breaks free from the ropes, the *laes*, who is accompanied by the spirit, begins to experience 'real life'. At this stage, the merging of the *laes* and the angel spirit is settled, and the *laes* becomes *bidadari*, and vice versa.



Figure 2. Second Scene of Laesan: *Kurungan*
Source: Author's collection, 2018

After the cage opened, the *laes* stands up and begins to dance like a woman with eyes closed, as shown in Figure 3. His gesture is gentle and slow, with a short step. Sometimes, his direction is unstable, staggering right and left, until the *cantrik*, who acts as a guide, touches his body slightly to return to the 'path'. Similar to the journey of life, the 'soul' may unconsciously follow a wrong direction and need to be reminded to return to a better path. The *Kurungan* scene can also represent the process of someone coming out of the comfort zone. The *laes* is viewed as a *tukang becak* (pedicab driver) in real life, which is closely associated with 'physical work', and requires significant energy that can cause fatigue. Being a *laesan* dancer is related to 'mental work' with different feelings of exhaustion. The transformation is clear, making the audience able to watch the entire process (Ripto, personal communication, September 29, 2018). Coming out from the comfort zone is not easy, especially when crossing between the real to magical world, and from the physical to the mental work. This relates more to the soul, where everyone cannot see. The dancer must recognise, accept, and give access to the angel spirit. After the spirit enters the body, 'awake mode' turns to 'sleeping mode', as they enter a new and different world.



Figure 3. *Kurungan* Scene: Laes Dance with Eyes Closed
Source: Author's collection, 2018

- 3) In the playing (*dolanan*) scene, a spatial experience between the *laes* and the audience is created. If there is a member of the audience (must be a man) who wants to participate in the performance, the *cantrik* will bring him on stage and the *laes* will blow smoke into his ear to transfer the spirit of the angel, as pictured in the Figure 4. At that moment, something extraordinary happens; the man becomes a temporary *laes*, and the *laes* was covered in a cage to wait until the scene ended. The temporary *laes* plays according to the *laes*' request. The most

requested *dolanan* by *laes* performers are *pencak silat*, *jaran dawuk*, and *ador gambir*⁹, as shown in Figure 5. Previously, there were *dolanan* related to *keris*¹⁰. However, for safety, this is no longer carried out. Moreover, if that *dolanan* is requested, the *cantrik* often tries to persuade the *laes* to choose another game.



Figure 4. Third Scene of the Laesan: *Dolanan – The Process of Transferring Spirits*
Source: Author's collection, 2018



Figure 5. *Dolanan* Scene: *Ador Gambir* (left) and *Jaran Dawuk* (right)

Source: Author's collection, 2018

⁹ *Pencak silat* is Indonesian martial arts; *Jaran dawuk* is terminology for a “unseen or magical horse”, and *Ador gambir* is Javanese terminology for *gambir* seller. *Gambir* is a crude, dried extract of the leaves of *Uncaria gambir*.

¹⁰ Indonesian traditional daggers with asymmetrical blade-patterning.

- 4) After the *dolanan*, is the healing scene (*pengobatan*). This scene is the most anticipated scene for the audience. The *laes* walks on stage carrying a bamboo tray of offerings (*sesajen*), which are given to the audience in accordance with his wishes. At this stage, the chant, '*Luru O Sintren*', is sung. The giving of offerings is not done randomly because the *laes* can 'see' and give to people who need his 'help'. The distribution of the offering is not limited to the audience at the performance alone. In the past, the *laes* went to the houses around the village to provide the offerings (Yon Suprayoga, personal communication, September 23, 2018).
- 5) Before the performance comes to an end, the *laes* asks for *pamitan* or permission to 'go home' as the *Kembang Jamur* was sung. The lyric reveals that the angel spirit (*bidadari* or *widodari* in Javanese) inside the *laes* is asking for permission to return. At this scene, even though the face of the *laes* is not expressive, the sadness is seen in the dance movement. The *laes*' dance becomes weak and the pace slows down, as pictured in Figure 6. This is probably because the *laes* and the angel spirit have formed a bond, which makes them sad to break it apart. While watching the show, a simple question came to mind: who asked for permission to go home? Based on the lyrics of the song, the *widodari* asked for permission. However, is the *widodari* asking the *laes* or the audience? From the interview with Mr Suprayoga, in 2018, it was revealed that the show was performed without an audience. Therefore, the permission was addressed to the body and soul of the *laes*, which was borrowed by the *widodari*.



Figure 6. Fifth Scene of the Laesan: Pamit
Source: Author's collection, 2018

- 6) The last scene of the performance was marked by the chant of *Lara Tangis Layung-Layung*, which means '*kesedihan teramat sangat*' or 'an extreme sorrow'. In that scene, the author watched the *laes* weep, and wondered, who is crying? The *laes* or *widodari*? In reference to the lyrics of the chant, it does not indicate if it is the *widodari* or *laes*. It generally refers

to the people or '*wong*', in Javanese. Based on that statement, the author tried to explore the matter with an inner discussion. Why should the *laes* cry? He must be happy because he will return to the real world and reunite with his consciousness. If he does not become a *laes*, he could always experience a variety of real-life activities, and if so, we can be sure that the one crying is the *widodari*. She was sad to leave the real world, which is full with the colours of life, where she could meet a lot of people, play, and share. Sadness and fear are a part of life that must be faced, whether one is prepared to accept it or not, such as the time of separation or even death. However, if we remember God or *pangeran* (which is often used within *laesan*'s chant), any kind of fear and sadness will disappear. This is because, in the end, death cannot be avoided. After all, it is a part of destiny. At the end of this scene, the *pawang*¹¹ wakes the *laes* up. His eyes are open again, and he immediately takes a deep breath. At this point, the author had a chance to ask: "how do you feel right now?". He answered: "*Koyo bangun tidur dari mimpi yang panjang*" (It was like waking up from a long dream) (Ripto, personal communication, September 29, 2018).

There is various uniqueness in *laesan*. Although *laes* is a man who engages with *bidadari* (*female*) in the soul that influences his dance moves to be more lady-like, the *cantrik* still refers to the *laes* as '*mbah*'. *Mbah* is a term in Javanese for both grandfather and grandmother. Surely, there is no statement about gender in this performance, but what the *cantrik* means during the *laesan* is 'the grandfather'. The statement explores another view of the performance, which is about the balance between male and female nature. Another perspective of balance is the balance in life. From the lyrics of the chant in each session, there is an encounter with the *bidadari* that represents the soul in the *ngenuwun* scene, as well as separation in the *penutupan* scene. There is also a female (*shintren*) and a man (*santri* or *laesan*), birth in the *kurungan* scene and death in the closing scene, and there is joy in the *dolanan* scene, and pain in the *pengobatan*, and *pamitan* scenes.

Apart from all the above, *laesan* also showcased a message about the horizontal and vertical communications. It specifically focussed on the communication between the *laes* with God, the *bidadari*, the *cantrik*, and the audience. The horizontal communication with the *cantrik* occurs when the *laes* was inside the cage because he does not talk when he is outside. There are three conditions in which the *laes* must be in the cage: when his body is tied, if he falls while dancing, and when he is waiting for the *dolanan* scene. The horizontal space is also created between the *laes* and audience during the *pengobatan* scene; the *laes* has direct contact with the audience. The vertical communications take place inside the cage between the *laes*, *bidadari*, and *pangeran*. The *bidadari* is believed to provide additional energy to the *laes*, making him able to untie the rope during the *kurungan* scene, and exchange clothes inside the cage, within a space of only one metre in diameter and height (Yon Suprayoga and Moh Hatta, personal communication, September 23, 2018). The term, '*pangeran*', in most of the *laesan*

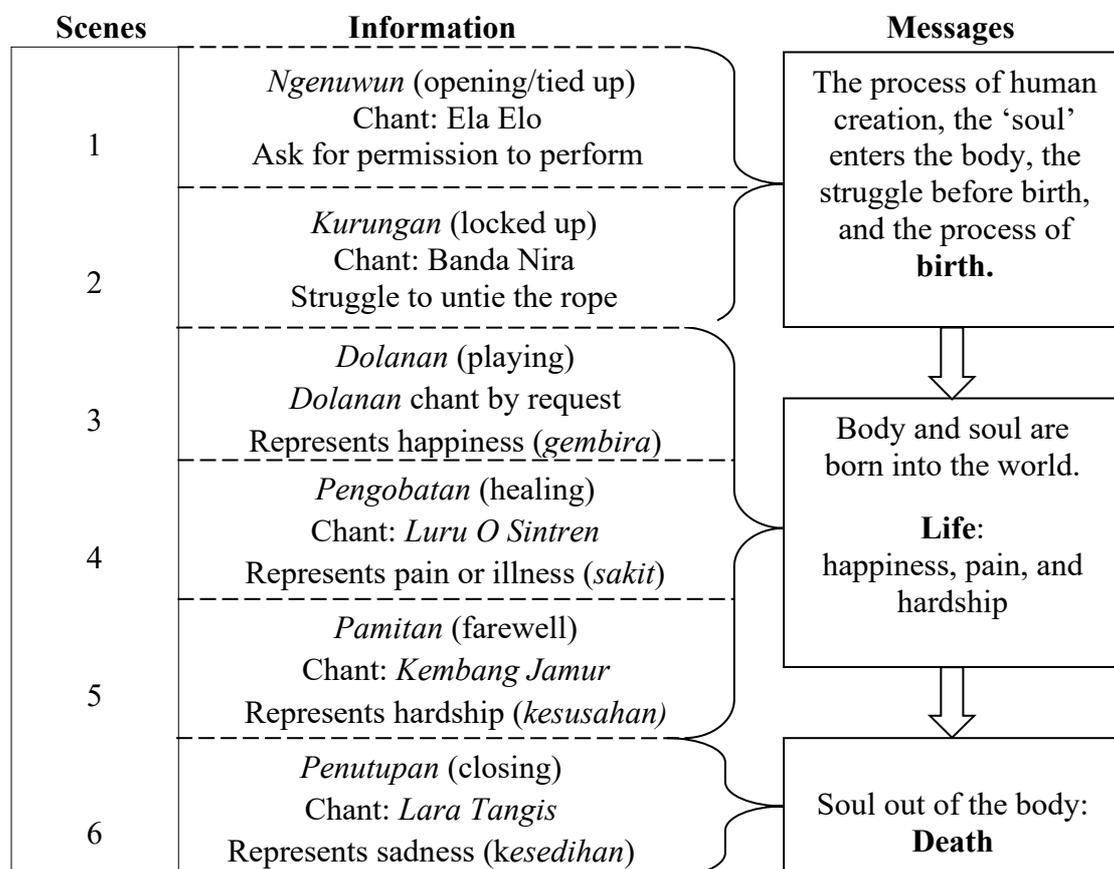
¹¹ The *pawang* is the *laesan* controller. He usually initiates, maintains, controls and closes the performance after the dancer (*laes*) and angel spirit have finished dancing.

lyrics, also contributes vertical communication between the *laes* and God. In English, the term *pangeran* can be interpreted as the prince, and in the Javanese perspective, it is to become the prince of life or God. The word is also a symbol of the highest position that can make everything possible. With the introduction of Islam into Java, the word *pangeran* was regarded as Allah S.W.T.

Conclusion

The embodiment of *laesan* in Lasem is not easy, as there are many challenges to be faced. *Laesan* was once stopped but eventually revived, and it was able to penetrate several eras and still survive until this day, without losing its identity. *Laesan* has a sacred value, especially for the performers because they believe the existence of *bidadari* inside the dancer is the extension of God. The performance contains messages that depict the complexity of human life and each message contains different meanings that are presented through the scenes. Each scene is expected to be a gentle reminder about the message of life to the wider community. The Chart 1 below pictures the findings of this study regarding the messages of life that start from birth and continue until death. Although *laesan* is not a popular art performance in Indonesia, especially in Java, this study confirms that *laesan*, as a traditional performance, transmits a symbolic and philosophical Javanese culture that may be widely applied.

Chart. 1 The Hidden Message of the Laesan: The Cycle of Human Life





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