

Power Behind Powerlessness: The Myth of *Konco Wingking* in Javanese Culture through Damar Kurung Painting

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *konco wingking* in Javanese culture, meaning ‘friend behind’, is associated with the traditional role of Javanese women as wives and mothers based on the ideology of patriarchy and feudalism. This myth is believed to reinforce the subordinate status of Javanese women. By analysing Damar Kurung and using visual ethnography, this study examines the impact of the *konco wingking* myth on gender relations in Javanese society. This traditional artwork has existed since the 16th century on the northern coast of East Java, Indonesia, and was passed down through an old female painter named Masmundari. She interpreted the myths circulating in Javanese society through artistic practices. This study collected visual data from museums and galleries, and verbal data from interviews and observations. By combining verbal and visual data using Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist theory of mythology and Foucault’s concept of power, this study shows how Javanese women, despite their primarily domestic roles, play important roles in the family, society, and state. These women adopt distinct approaches to achieving empowerment and equality with men, utilizing their feminine characteristics, calmness, and resilience in adversity.

Keywords: Damar Kurung, Javanese, myth, traditional painting, women, *konco wingking*

Introduction

Despite the gradual extinction of some local beliefs due to modernization, the Javanese society remains devoted to myths and local traditions. In Javanese culture, myths are stories that represent a set of values and conventions. Local beliefs are utilized to reinforce and shape these myths, as noted by Yasraf Amir Piliang and Ahmad Izzuddin (*Contemporary Cultural Theory* 108; 285). A myth is a genre of folklore that contains a cultural or historical narrative of society (Izzuddin 2; Kencis 13). Endraswara defines myth as a symbolic narrative that recounts a series of true and/or fictitious events about an occurrence, deities, divine powers, and human identity (*Filosofi dan Estetika Javanese*, 193). Myths are not only symbolic but also offer realistic and direct depictions of the subject matter (Wibowo 2). Deeply rooted in Indonesian culture, specifically Javanese culture, myths hold cultural significance. They represent shared cultural values and contribute to the collective imagination that shapes a community's worldview.

Endraswara identifies four aspects of Javanese myths: Firstly, they are sacrosanct and associated with individuals who are respected and believed to have supernatural powers (*Menggali Kearifan Lokal* 20). Therefore, rituals and offerings are necessary to pay homage to them. Secondly, myths exist only within the imaginary realm and not in the reality of everyday Javanese life. Thirdly, many myths in Java refer to significant natural events or occurrences. Lastly, Javanese culture holds that myths are not bound by human logic and therefore their accuracy is not considered relevant. While these myths are often seen as strange, fictitious, and absurd, they still serve as a reference point for truth. To establish a cohesive and structured socio-cultural system and preserve Javanese knowledge, communal oral and inherited narratives are interwoven to produce myths in Javanese culture (28).

There exist many interpretations and characterizations of Javanese philosophical principles regarding femininity. The construct of a Javanese woman's identity is intrinsically linked to her interpersonal interactions and expressive qualities. This intergenerational transmission establishes a stable ideological framework. The idea of being a Javanese woman can be observed in various art forms, such as ancient literary works and the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performances. In Javanese culture, *konco wingking* is a term used to refer to a woman who heavily depends on her husband for her welfare.

The myth of *konco wingking* has been assimilated into Javanese society. The phrase ‘*wong lanang nang ngarep, wong wedok nang mburi*’ (men in front, women in back) is often associated with physical space, whereby the front represents the public sphere, and the back, the private sphere (Budiman 82). One element of prior scholarship’s marginalization of gender has been the assumption that women living in rural areas across historical periods were socially isolated and primarily confined to their domestic spaces (Budiman 84; Fakhri 22). This belief could have contributed to their being placed in a subordinate role in the oral storytelling tradition (Magnúsdóttir 98). The domestic sphere encompasses household responsibilities, including child-rearing, serving the husband, cooking, cleaning the house, and other domestic duties. This symbolic division of labor has endured in Javanese society to this day. The Javanese acknowledge and uphold this differentiation. Traditionally, men are expected to inhabit the public sphere, fulfilling roles related to economic provision, religious duties, community leadership, and formal education. These responsibilities are seen as extensions of their role as protectors and decision-makers within the family and society. Meanwhile, women’s roles in the domestic sphere—though less publicly visible—are regarded as equally vital, sustaining familial harmony and cultural continuity. This complementary worldview reflects the Javanese ideal of balance and order (*rukun*), even as it reinforces hierarchical gender roles. Javanese individuals learn to comprehend and fulfill their unique responsibilities through familial life. Females are predominantly allocated domestic responsibilities while males carry out public duties such as economics, politics, education, and religion. This division has been a central factor contributing to the belief in the superiority of men, leading to women being deemed inferior. This has occurred in the past and continues to persist today. The division of roles is often reinforced by various ideas and articles that prescribe and encourage women to remain in the home (Budiman 82).

Sexual identity is a complicated phenomenon related to different aspects of human social life, such as identity, gender roles, gender relations, family, marriage, and reproduction (Çötok 5). Gender identity is constructed based on views, beliefs, and values which are often dominant views or values derived from influential sources, including religion, politics, economics, education, culture, and the arts (Takovski 150). Art can unveil the presence of myths. In Javanese culture, mythology is often presented in symbolic and aesthetic artworks (Anderson 167; Holt 44). These stories

are often used to teach lessons or to clarify specific phenomena. Although some people may consider these myths to be untrue or superstitious, they continue to be a significant aspect of Javanese society. According to Piliang, it is necessary to include ideology when discussing mythology (115). If a myth is a narrative that employs language and is linked to rhetoric, then ideology is the underlying meaning or set of values embedded within it (121). Javanese individuals are often described as *wong Jawa nggone semu*, a phrase that suggests a cultural tendency to express meaning indirectly or symbolically. The word *semu* refers to subtlety or ambiguity, indicating that meaning in Javanese culture is often conveyed not through direct statements, but through signs, gestures, and layered expressions. The phrase also implies that a person's outward appearance—not only physical features but also mannerisms, dress, and demeanor—is imbued with *sasmita*, or signs that carry deeper, often unspoken meanings. In this context, *sasmita* refers to culturally understood cues or symbols that hint at one's social status, emotional state, or intentions. These forms of implicit communication are essential to Javanese people. In traditional paintings, such as Damar Kurung, abstract ideas, moral teachings, or social commentaries are similarly conveyed through symbolic imagery using color, composition, and iconography to reveal meanings that may not be immediately apparent.

Traditional paintings in Indonesia adhere to specific patterns and regulations and are passed down through generations across various materials such as paper, fabric, leather, glass, leaves, and wood. These paintings often embody intellectual, spiritual, social, economic, and cultural principles alongside depictions of religious or communal values. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of traditional Indonesian painting is prominently notable. Many studies on traditional paintings, including ones from Bali, specifically the *Kamasan* and *Pita Maha* paintings have been carried out. Nevertheless, traditional paintings from Yogyakarta (Central Java), Cirebon (West Java), and Gresik (East Java) can also be encountered beyond Bali.

The main object to be analyzed in this study is the Damar Kurung painting from Gresik, located on the north coast of East Java. As a form of traditional art, Damar Kurung paintings were created by various individuals from the Gresik community, many of whom were not formally trained artists and had no academic background in aesthetics. These anonymous painters, while not “artists” in the conventional or institutional sense, developed their skills autodidactically, drawing on

community knowledge, observation, and inherited cultural practices. Most were ordinary residents of Kroman and Lumpur Villages, slum coastal settlements near the northern edge of Gresik. Among them were Kiai Untung, Sinom, Masriatun, Masehi, and Masmundari—close family members who played a significant role in preserving this folk tradition (Rokayah). However, only Masmundari (Fig. 1) came to be recognized as the Maestra of Damar Kurung. She was the last female artist to continuously preserve Damar Kurung until she passed away in 2005 at over 100 years old. Masmundari does not sketch before painting (Rokayah). She creates her artwork by observing social phenomena such as market activities, slametan (traditional ceremonies), weddings, circumcisions, padusan (visiting ancestral graves), macapatan (traditional Javanese poetry), Independence Day celebration carnivals, Qur'an recitations, and other public activities that reflect the Gresik's local culture.

Damar Kurung is a traditional art form that originated among the indigenous peoples of Gresik (Fig. 1). It shares characteristics with folk arts from other Southeast Asian regions. Generally, folk arts in Southeast Asia are created based on



Fig. 1. Masmundari and Damar Kurung Painting

Source: Informasi Jawa Timur Mossaik Magazine 10th edition/ I/ February 2003: 106-08

observations of everyday natural life scenes and are expressed through simple and symbolic visual elements (Taylor 211). Matthew Isaac Cohen also suggests that folk arts in the Southeast Asian region are frequently used in religious ceremonies and rituals (216). As a result, these artistic expressions include stories about historical events, legends, mythology, folk tales, fables, fairy tales, poems, and songs that convey moral teachings to the community (216).

In terms of visual characteristics, folk arts from Southeast Asia exhibit similarities such as the use of vibrant and bold colors, intricate patterns and detailed decorations, and local materials (Klekot 227). The selection of color is not simply an aesthetic decision; each hue carries a distinct symbolic significance. This includes incorporating intricate patterns and detailed decorations designed to fulfill the requirements of religious ceremonies and ritual actions directed towards deities or natural entities (Yan He 1103). Therefore, the design and decoration patterns in folk art serve not only an aesthetic purpose, showcasing the beauty and craftsmanship of the artists, but also a communicative function, conveying meaning through the combination of symbols, motifs, and iconography in a symbolic language (Klekot 116).

Damar Kurung originally functioned as a block-shaped lantern with all four sides decorated with various visual elements. From the 1990s onwards, Masmundari transformed Damar Kurung into a two-dimensional work of art on a wooden-framed canvas. Each side showcases three to four scenes arranged in a vertical configuration. The human figures are depicted in a two-dimensional manner, similar to the style of *wayang kulit* and *wayang beber* (rolled puppet), focusing on depicting the daily activities of the Gresik community. The elements are linearly arranged, either in a lateral alignment or an upward displacement, with the use of dividing lines to delineate the various scenes. Additionally, Masmundari frequently includes depictions of animals, primarily poultry and occasionally horses, along with plants, particularly trees, as symbols of spatial boundaries. The colors used are bright, even, and lack gradation, and the canvas includes symbols of arrows, zigzag lines, and three dots.

In her creative processes, Masmundari depicts human figures that represent the socio-cultural conditions from the 1990s to the 2000s. The male human figures are shown wearing either long or short pants and are sometimes adorned with a

Madurese cap (*udeng*). Female human figures are depicted wearing dresses, tube tops, ankle-length wraparound skirts, headscarves, or prayer gowns. In the case of children, the human figures are created on a smaller scale and sometimes appear unclothed, with only shorts and no footwear. Masmundari also illustrates the industrialization of Gresik by depicting an array of vehicles. By altering the size of human figures, Masmundari emphasizes the primacy of the figure as a subject worthy of representation. Although drawing from traditional sources, Masmundari's creative process is influenced by a contemporary sensibility, resulting in a wide range of themes. Masmundari observed and interpreted the times, then candidly and immediately retold what she saw.

In its evolution, Damar Kurung underwent a series of modifications in techniques, methodologies, and materials, adapting itself to the demands of the era. The first example is a paper lantern (1600 to 1970s) created by Masmundari's relatives and anonymous Gresik artists (Rokayah). Despite the lack of attribution, the work demonstrates a technical adherence to traditional methods, evident in the symbolization and stylization employed. The material used is paper derived from cassava, while the coloring agent employed is food coloring (*sumbo*) in conjunction with traditional pigments, including red, yellow, blue, black, and white. The lighting apparatus continues to employ the use of candles or wick lamps with oil fuel. The second example is a lantern crafted from fiberglass or mica, created circa 1999. In terms of technique and method, it adheres to the same traditional methods observed in the previous example, namely symbolization and stylization. The material is composed of fiberglass or mica glass with a wooden frame, which enhances the product's resilience and durability in varying weather conditions. The lighting is provided by electric sources. The coloring is achieved using markers for the creation of charts, while for larger areas, acrylic paint is employed. The use of a more contemporary palette allows for a greater range of hues and a tendency towards graduated shades. The three Damar Kurungs underwent a transition from folk craft art to contemporary vernacular art (1990s - 2000s) and were created by Masmundari herself, with occasional assistance from family members due to health considerations (Effendy). In terms of technique and method, the artists continue to employ traditional techniques, namely symbolization and stylization. The material used is drawing paper or canvas of a larger width. This facilitates the emergence of a multiplicity of scenes within each sequence. The coloring is already of the type

commonly sold at that time, such as markers or paint. During this period, Damar Kurung reached its apogee. Damar Kurung in the form of contemporary vernacular art began to be widely exhibited in national-scale galleries. The exhibition at Bentara Budaya Jakarta in 1987 proved to be a significant turning point in the careers of Masmundari and Damar Kurung, leading to greater public awareness of Damar Kurung and prompting numerous officials and collectors to visit the gallery and purchase pieces for their collections.

The transition of Damar Kurung from folk art to contemporary vernacular art can be attributed to several factors, particularly cultural, social, and economic changes. Urbanization and industrialization in Gresik in the 1990s played a significant role in this shift. The inhabitants of Gresik, originally characterized by a rural lifestyle, both maritime and agrarian, gradually transitioned into an urban society with individualistic tendencies and a focus on personal expression. This shift also influenced the community's preferences and attitudes towards art. As a result, Masmundari changed the direction of Damar Kurung (Damar Kurung Institute). Initially seen as a mere commodity for generating income, Damar Kurung, after its inaugural exhibition, came to be perceived not only as an economic commodity but also as a social status symbol. It is no longer sold in the traditional streets; instead, it is now available for purchase in galleries and art museums catering to an upper-class clientele. Damar Kurung, moreover, has become a highly esteemed work of art that can be installed and appreciated at any time, not just during the fasting month of Ramadan. The impact of industrialization resulted in greater financial prosperity for the people of Gresik, leading to an increase in demand for tertiary products. This demand encouraged Masmundari to continue creating Damar Kurung pieces to satisfy the requirements of the emerging demographic.

This shift allows Masmundari to continue pursuing innovation and engage in more extensive artistic experimentation than was previously possible within the restrictions of folk art practices. However, this change has led to the rise of elitism and a widening of the class gap in society. The commercialization of Damar Kurung as contemporary art has led to a division between those who can afford it as a collectible and those who cannot. This creates challenges regarding the inclusivity and accessibility of art. The value of Damar Kurung as contemporary art is very high, restricting access for a large portion of the population and perpetuating socio-economic inequality in the realm of art appreciation and consumption.

In response to this issue, the Gresik government and the local preservation community have implemented a series of initiatives to improve art accessibility. These initiatives include public art installation projects, community-based festival initiatives, and digital platforms such as archives and virtual museums. The Damar Kurung Festival, initiated by Novan Effendy, is a significant step in this effort (Damar Kurung Institute).

In 2012, Effendy, the founder of the Damar Kurung Institute, started the Damar Kurung Festival, which was held annually until 2023 (Damar Kurung Institute). The festival stands out for its participatory approach, involving the community in a collaborative process. Due to the high level of enthusiasm, the festival became a regular event, moving from one village to another. By showcasing Damar Kurung in the Gresik village, it provides the best opportunity for understanding and preserving the significance of Damar Kurung at the grassroots level. The festival acts as a platform for sharing knowledge and ideas related to the cultural identity of the Gresik community, especially in the face of challenges from industrialization and capitalism (Effendy). It aims to connect the past, present, and future, and foster



Fig. 2. The transformation of Damar Kurung
Source: Author, 2023

a sense of social ownership, uniting and promoting mutual respect, creating a harmonious community. Additionally, the festival has a positive impact on the local economy, as Damar Kurung is a significant contributor to Gresik's economic growth (Damar Kurung Institute). This includes activities such as Damar Kurung batik, art gallery-themed cafes, the Masmundari virtual museum, and other creative products inspired by Damar Kurung. Intangible cultural heritage is a valuable economic resource, and to preserve it, the participation of a diverse range of stakeholders is crucial, especially those who possess the cultural heritage in question (Chen 568). Incorporating intangible cultural heritage such as Damar Kurung into economic activities can enhance and strengthen local economic growth. The Gresik community not only upholds Damar Kurung as cultural heritage, but also utilizes the traditional knowledge embedded in it.

On October 4, 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia designated Damar Kurung as part of the nation's intangible cultural heritage. Artworks are always embedded in a particular socio-political environment and can be influenced by institutional, academic, and bureaucratic factors (Holt 45; Wiryomartono 49). They also reflect the aesthetic trends of their time and embody the personal expression of their creators.

The Damar Kurung paintings by Masmundari depict various aspects of women's lives, including household chores such as cooking, making batik, and taking care of children. Masmundari's artwork recognizes the roles of women as wives and mothers. The paintings also show women engaging in public activities such as market trading, where they are depicted not only as buyers but also sellers. The traded commodities depicted in the paintings include clothing, food, snacks, *legen* (traditional alcoholic drinks), and handcrafted goods, highlighting that these products are the result of women's household work rather than being produced in a factory.

The rise in popularity and prominence of Damar Kurung paintings in the 1990s to 2000s coincided with the authoritarian rule of President Soeharto (the New Order regime), a period characterized by strongly restricted freedom of speech, politics, and artistic expression, and expectations imposed by the government regarding women's roles and behavior (Tickamyer 157). This ideology is referred to as state ibuism (*ibu* is mother) which emphasized the role of women as exemplary wives and homemakers contributing to the country's progress and development

(Suryakusuma 89). As the state promoted this ideology, the *konco wingking* myth gained greater acceptance and assimilation.

Unlike many paintings that depict women from a male perspective, Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings represent women's perspectives. This study examines the visual narratives in Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings to explore how gender ideologies are embedded in traditional Javanese art. Specifically, it seeks to identify and describe the gender ideology behind Masmundari's visual representations in response to the long-standing *konco wingking* myth in Javanese society. Through visual analysis, this research investigates how Damar Kurung paintings portray gender relations, and whether the *konco wingking* myth—as depicted in these artworks—perpetuates women's subordination or, conversely, enables them to exercise a form of cultural power.

Methodologies

This study aims to explore the *konco wingking* myth in Javanese society, particularly its relationship with gender roles. It also seeks to interpret the myth's meaning within Javanese philosophy through an analysis of Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings. To achieve this, the study employs a visual ethnography approach, integrating both visual and verbal data for a comprehensive analysis (Barrantes-Elizondo 363; Pink 220).

Visual Data Collection

The visual data for this research comprises Damar Kurung paintings created by Masmundari during the 1990s and 2000s, the peak of her creative output and acclaim. This period is crucial in understanding her artistic intentions and the context in which the paintings were produced. During these years, Masmundari's works were actively sought by galleries and collectors, reflecting her prominence in the art world. Notably, her works from this period were primarily her own, with minimal influence from family members until the late 1990s when health issues led to family involvement in the production process.

The visual data set includes paintings sourced from museums, galleries, and private collections, as well as photographic material from the 1990s to 2000s. These photographs, collected through literature searches and interviews with cultural

figures from Gresik, provide additional context and comparative evidence for the research.

Visual Analysis Methodology

To analyze the data, the study employs Gillian Rose's visual methodology, which offers a structured approach to interpreting visual materials. Rose's methodology involves three analytical sites: the site of production, the image itself, and the audience reception (Rose 133; Barrantes-Elizondo 370).

The first analytical site, the site of production, refers to the context in which the paintings were created. In the context of this study, the socio-cultural environment and Masmundari's personal and professional circumstances during the 1990s and 2000s is examined. For the second analytical site, the image itself, the focus is on the formal elements of the paintings—plots, lines, shapes, colors, and composition. Representation of human figures, mythological characters, animals, and settings are examined. Specific attention is given to the frequency and representation of male and female figures and other symbolic elements that reflect gender roles and social values. The last analytical site, audience reception, revolves around the interpretation and meanings attributed to the paintings by the receiving audience. Analyzing this site helps in understanding how the paintings influence and reflect social perceptions of gender and mythology.

Verbal Data Collection

Verbal data was collected through field observations and interviews using purposive sampling of select participants who met the criteria: female residents of the north coastal area of East Java (Gresik, Surabaya, and surrounding regions), aged 55 and above, with a lower-middle economic status, and married or in family settings. This demographic was selected to reflect the social context in which Masmundari created her works, as the participants' experiences provide insights on the themes of gender roles and mythology depicted in Damar Kurung.

Interviews were conducted and recorded, then transcribed and coded to identify significant themes related to myths and gender roles. By using Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to analyze the myth of *konco wingking* in the Damar Kurung painting, the narrative structure embedded in this myth and its implications for

gender relations in Javanese society could be uncovered. Lévi-Strauss's approach reveals that myths, like the Damar Kurung paintings, are not just aesthetic objects but cultural texts that encode complex societal values (432). In the case of *konco wingking*, the myth reinforces traditional gender roles while also allowing for the possibility of resistance and subversion. While Lévi-Strauss' structuralist theory provides a framework for understanding the underlying structures of myths ; Michel Foucault's theory of power is also applied to analyze how power dynamics are depicted and challenged in the paintings and the associated mythological narratives (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 78).

Unraveling Gender Myths through a Collaborative Method

To integrate and validate the findings from both visual and verbal data, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. These discussions facilitated the clarification and validation of interpretations, ensuring a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the *konco wingking* myth and its implications for gender roles in Javanese society. FGDs allowed for collaborative reflection and interpretation, strengthening the reliability of the research outcomes.

By integrating visual and verbal data and applying theoretical frameworks, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the myth and its impact on cultural perceptions of gender.

The following is a flowchart of the research methodology (Fig. 3) based on the explanation below:

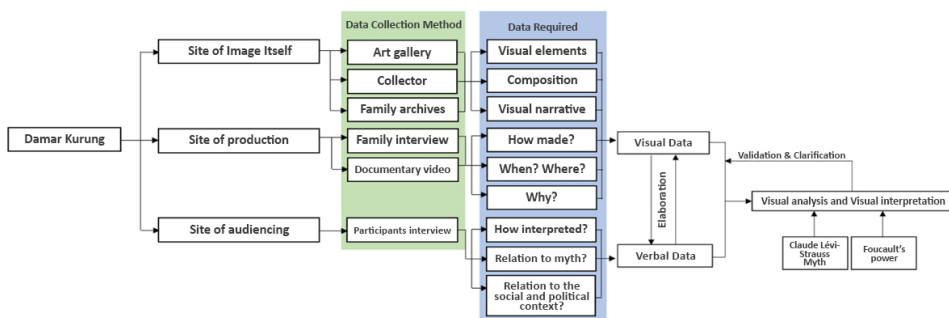


Fig. 3. The research methodology flowchart

Source: Author, 2024

Women, *Slametan* and the *Rewang* Tradition

The *rewang* tradition, a cornerstone of Javanese culture, particularly in Gresik, exemplifies the deep-rooted values of mutual cooperation and the complex power dynamics between men and women (Permanadeli 102; Reid 87). This tradition, embedded within the broader context of the *slametan* ritual, highlights the interdependent roles of men and women, each contributing to the ritual's success in distinct yet complementary ways. By examining these roles and their implications, we gain insights into how gender relations in Javanese society are both nuanced and reflective of broader social and cultural values.

In a *slametan*—a communal feast that marks significant life events or religious observances—men and women perform specific roles. Men, seated cross-legged in the front (*ngarepan*), engage in prayer and are the visible face of the ritual, while women, stationed at the back (*wingking*), are responsible for the meticulous preparation of food and arrangements that ensure the ritual's smooth execution. The vertical relationship with God, central to the *slametan* and primarily facilitated by men, relies heavily on the preparatory work done by women, underscoring the significant yet often understated control women have in these spiritual and communal practices. While the role of men and women are symbolically separate, they are fundamentally interdependent.

Slametan is represented in Masmundari's Damar Kurung titled *Tingkeban*, a 40 x 50 cm and consists of three sections (Fig. 4). All the scenes take place indoors and are characterized by a triangular or trapezoidal shape on top of each section, resembling the shape of a house roof. The bottom section depicts the lively atmosphere of a *slametan* preparation, with a focus on cooking together. Masmundari portrays the cooking process, which is mainly carried out by six adult women, with the help of boys and girls. This cooking scene typically takes place in a kitchen or in a designated area provided by the host, such as a neighbor's terrace or a spacious backyard. In rural-urban settings like Gresik, these activities often occur in or in front of neighbors' houses after obtaining permission. The sequence shows various kitchen equipment such as pots, cauldrons, rice cookers, oil stoves, clay stoves, baskets, fish, and fruits. The human figures and objects are depicted without perspective and are lined up sideways (Fig. 4). The human figures appear to be floating and overlapping. In Javanese culture, the act of preparing a *slametan* through cooking together is known as *rewang*.

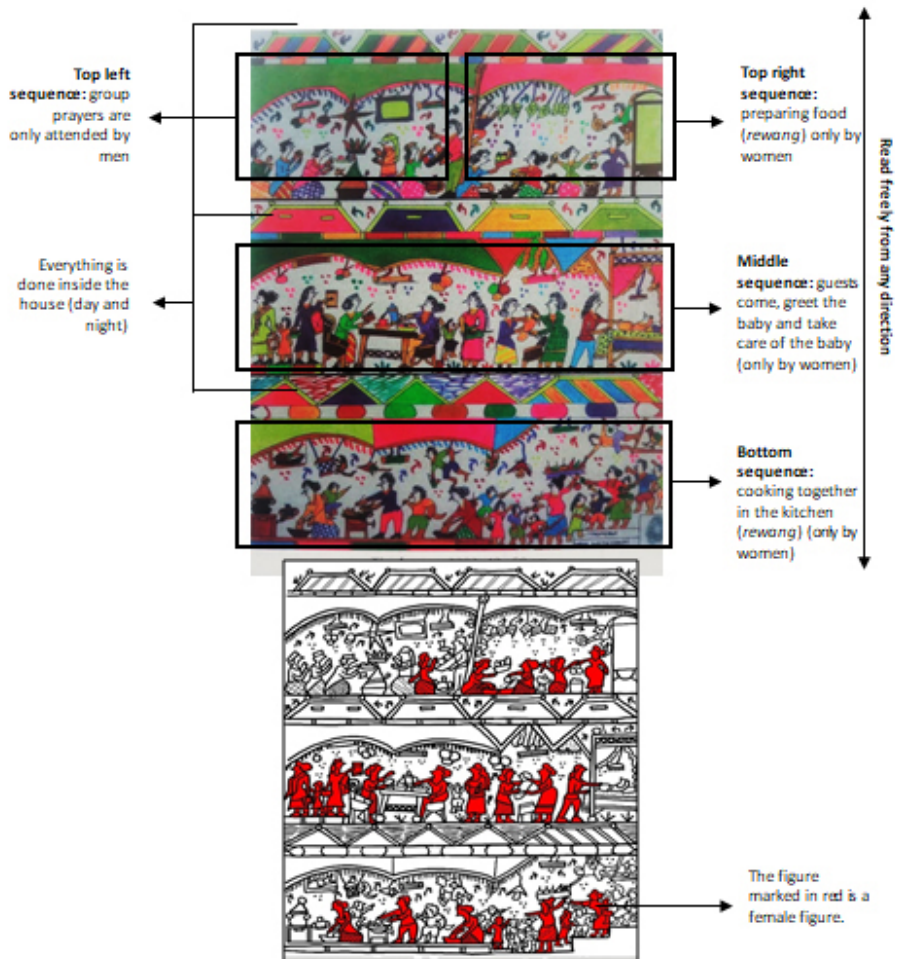


Fig. 4. Visual analysis of Damar Kurung painting titled *Tingkeban*

Source: Author, 2024

In the middle section, all the figures are women, including eight adult women and a child. The atmosphere in this section appears calmer and more organized compared to the bottom section. Several women are depicted sitting on chairs facing a table, serving food and drinks, while others are shown standing and facing right or left, resembling guests coming and going. On the other side, several women are depicted carrying and taking care of babies on a bed. The top section is divided into two different activities: on the right side, several women are shown preparing dishes,

and on the left side, several men are depicted wearing traditional headwear and sarongs, facing a *tumpeng* (rice that has been seasoned and colored yellow with turmeric then shaped into a cone resembling a mountain) while sitting on the floor with their legs folded, indicating a solemn position of prayer. As per the tradition in Gresik, after performing the prayer together, the men will consume the dishes prepared in advance by the women. The overall visualization of the *tingkeban slametan* is characterized by the presence of female figures, with only five male figures in the joint prayer scene.

The prayer stage involves all men who are members of the community based on territory, including neighbors and close relatives who live around the host. If the women are at the *wingking* (back), then the men are in the *ngarepan* (front), sitting cross-legged on mats, praying and enjoying the dishes prepared by the women (Fig. 5). Just like the concept of yin and yang, which are different yet complementary, the praying stage carried out by men is dependent on the preparation led by women. The activities in the *wingking* section prepare and complement the *ngarepan* section, and the ritual in *ngarepan* completes the *wingking* stage. The men will not be able to 'face God' if the women do not prepare everything properly. In the *slametan*, the vertical relationship between humans and communication with God is mediated

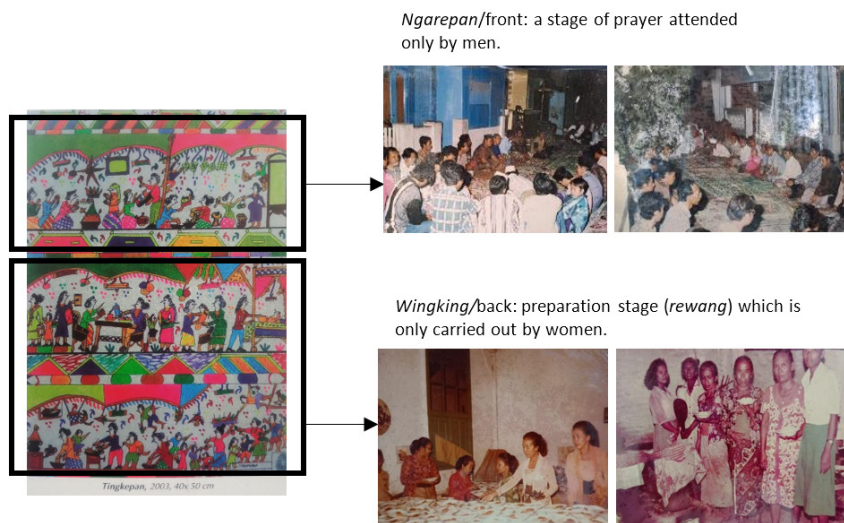


Fig. 5. Contextual analysis of Damar Kurung painting titled *Tingkeban*
Source: Andy Buchory's archives, 2022

by women. The local exchange network and social work in the *rewang* tradition serve as the main axis for the realization of *slametan*.

The term *rewang* in the Javanese language denotes both the act of helping and the role of a helper or servant (Permanadeli 102). This tradition, predominantly carried out by women, involves various tasks such as cooking, food preparation, and other logistical arrangements that are vital for the success of the *slametan*. Women participating in *rewang* bring their own kitchen utensils and contribute their labor with a sense of duty and community spirit. As Nur Endangmuji, a 58-year-old widow from Gresik, explains, “I help! Some peel onions, some cook rice, some fry crackers. When the event is on, I go home to shower, change, and dress up, then come back to help. I don’t just sit still.” This statement reflects the proactive involvement of women in these social and religious events, which not only support the host family but also strengthen communal bonds.

The *rewang* tradition is more than just a set of tasks; it is a practice that regulates social behavior, fosters social cohesion, and provides economic benefits by reducing the financial burden on the host family. Through this tradition, women contribute not only labor but also time and resources, which collectively ease the logistical challenges of hosting a *slametan*. The egalitarian nature of *rewang* is evident in the shared mindset and objectives of all participants. They work together without any sense of exploitation or inequality, demonstrating a communal spirit that is central to Javanese culture. This mutual cooperation reflects broader cultural values, such as *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) and *musyawarah* (deliberation), which are vital for maintaining social harmony.

Despite its importance, the *rewang* tradition, along with the broader domestic and social roles of women, is often misunderstood. The concept of *konco wingking*—a Javanese term that translates to “backroom partner”—is frequently interpreted as a symbol of female subordination, suggesting that women’s roles are limited to the domestic sphere. However, this essay argues that Javanese women are not confined by this role; instead, they wield significant influence within the domestic sphere, which extends into the public domain. From their often-invisible position, women establish and maintain social networks, influencing the social norms and values that shape their communities. This influence is not overt but is exercised through the subtle and strategic use of their roles within the domestic and social spheres.

Foucault's concept of power, which he describes as decentralized and relational, provides a useful framework for understanding the power dynamics at play in the *slametan* and *rewang* traditions. Unlike Max Weber's more hierarchical and institutional view of power, Foucault's perspective highlights how power operates through social relations and is exercised in subtle, often invisible ways (*Discipline and Punish* 91). In the context of Javanese culture, women's power is not expressed through overt authority or domination but through their ability to influence social outcomes and maintain social cohesion. This form of power, though subtle, is deeply embedded in the social fabric and is essential for the functioning of Javanese society (99).

The dominance of Javanese women in domestic affairs and their influence on broader societal structures have been well-documented by scholars such as Koentjaraningrat and Clifford Geertz. In Koentjaraningrat's studies of Javanese culture, he observes that women's roles in domestic settings often extend into the public sphere, where they play a crucial role in shaping social norms and values (*Javanese Culture* 203). Similarly, Geertz highlighted how Javanese women use their domestic roles to build and maintain social networks, which in turn give them influence and power within their communities (*The Religion of Jawa* 87). These networks, which are built on the principles of *srawung* (social interaction and networking), are crucial for the dissemination of knowledge and the establishment of social values (*Javanese Family* 25; *Javanese Culture*, 198; Reid 115).

Through the *rewang* tradition and their broader roles in domestic and social life, Javanese women demonstrate a form of power that is both subtle and pervasive. This power is exercised through non-verbal communication, body language, and actions rather than through explicit commands or overt displays of authority. In this sense, the power of Javanese women aligns with Foucault's notion of power as something that is exercised through social relations and is embedded in the fabric of everyday life (*Discipline and Punish* 169). The *slametan* ritual, with its emphasis on communal cooperation and mutual support, serves as a microcosm of these broader social dynamics, illustrating how women's roles in the domestic sphere extend into and shape the public sphere.

The *rewang* tradition and the *slametan* ritual in Javanese culture offer a rich example of how gender roles, power dynamics, and social networks intersect. Far from being

confined to a subordinate role, Javanese women wield significant influence within their communities, shaping social norms and values through their participation in these traditions. Their power, though often subtle and invisible, is nonetheless crucial for the functioning of Javanese society. As modernity continues to challenge traditional practices, the enduring significance of *rewang* and similar traditions highlights the resilience of these cultural practices and the important role they play in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Dual Roles of Javanese Women: Beyond the Double Burden

The paintings not only showcase visual beauty but also embody the moral and philosophical values deeply rooted in Javanese culture. Masmundari's work, informed by traditional conventions, illustrates how art serves as a medium for preserving and transmitting these values across generations (Wiryomartono 116).

The visual narratives in Damar Kurung are crucial in understanding the role of work in the lives of Javanese women. These women often engage in economic activities to achieve financial independence without abandoning their roles within the domestic sphere. In Javanese culture, this dual responsibility is not viewed as a burden or a form of oppression but rather as a marker of social success. The ability to balance work and household duties is seen as a testament to a woman's capability and resilience.

The gender dynamics in Javanese society is often perceived as male-dominated. While traditional views suggest male dominance in social and political spheres, the reality within households often contradicts this narrative. Javanese women exert significant influence over both domestic and broader community affairs, playing essential roles in managing household and economic resources. Scholars like Koentjaraningrat, Geertz, and Denys Lombard have all emphasized the importance of women's contributions to domestic life in Javanese society, highlighting how these roles form the foundation for the household and the larger society (*Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Indonesia and Malaysia* 196; *The Interpretation of Culture* 64; Lombard 92).

Interestingly, this dual role of juggling work and household responsibilities of Javanese women is not seen as conflicting with their cultural identity. Instead, it is perceived as an extension of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The

household serves as the primary space where Javanese women navigate these roles, which are closely intertwined with their participation in social and economic activities. The fluidity between the domestic and public spheres allows Javanese women to build social networks and expand their social spaces, reinforcing their roles in both the household and the community.

Fieldwork conducted in the Gresik community, particularly interviews with local women, supports this understanding. These interviews reveal that women in these households are adept at fulfilling both domestic responsibilities and economic roles. For example, women who run small businesses, like catering services or online clothing stores, manage to balance their work with household duties. One participant, Susilowati, age 50, from Sidoarjo, noted how her work in the catering industry allowed her to contribute to the family's income while still maintaining her responsibilities at home: "I cook for my family and sell [what I cook] at the same time. So, it's all at once!" This reflects a broader trend where the household structure does not confine women's activities but rather facilitates their engagement in both domestic and public spheres.

Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings provide a visual representation of this balance. The paintings depict women engaged in both domestic tasks, such as cooking and batik-making, and public activities, particularly trading in markets (Fig. 6). These scenes suggest that the household is the nucleus of informal economic activity, with women's work in the social world being an extension of their domestic roles. This challenges the conventional view that work outside the home is a separate, professional sphere, distinct from household activities. Instead, work depicted in Damar Kurung integrates seamlessly with domestic life, highlighting how women's economic contributions are deeply embedded in their everyday lives.

The flexibility of the household space, as portrayed in Damar Kurung, allows women to navigate their dual roles without feeling constrained by rigid boundaries between the domestic and public spheres. This is particularly evident in the way women contribute to informal economic activities, such as trading handmade goods or running small businesses from home. These activities do not require formal employment or adherence to strict production schedules, allowing women to manage their time according to their household responsibilities.

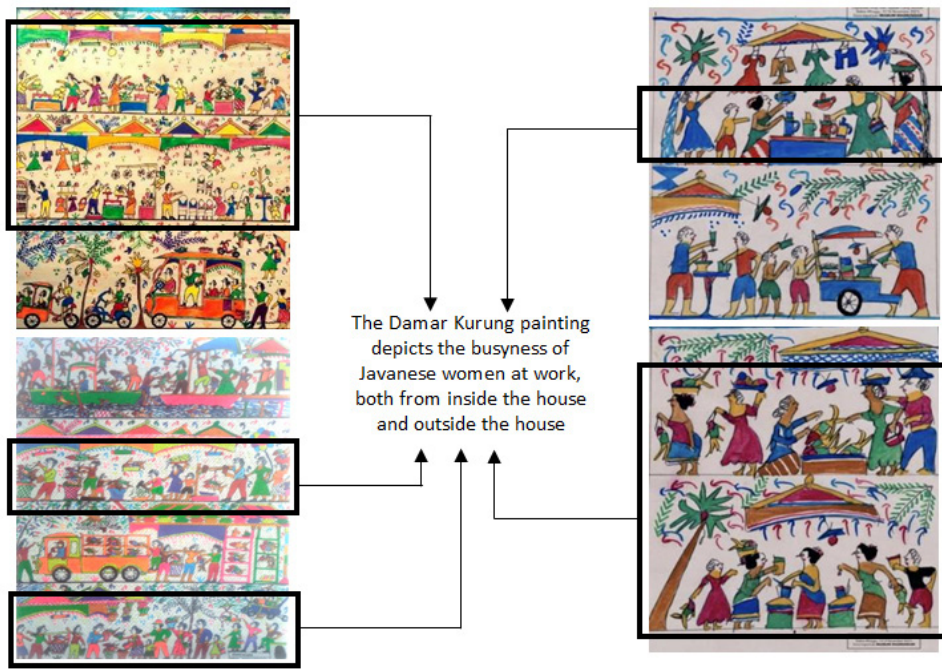


Fig. 6. Damar Kurung painting about women's work
 Source: Andy Buchory's archives, 2022

Moreover, the concept of *sepi ing pamrih*, *rame ing gawe* (selflessness and diligence) reflects the work ethic of Javanese women, who prioritize effort and community engagement over material gain. This ethic is deeply rooted in Javanese spiritual and cultural traditions, where work is seen as a means of maintaining health, building social networks, and fulfilling cultural and moral obligations. As Aslamah, age 59, from Surabaya explained, "The livelihood has been arranged by God. There is no need to worry. The main thing is to do everything diligently." This perspective emphasizes the importance of active participation in work, not just for economic reasons, but as a way of contributing to the social fabric of the community.

In addition to their economic contributions, Javanese women also play vital roles in social and community activities, often taking on responsibilities that are traditionally not associated with men. These include volunteering for early

childhood education and public health services, roles that are crucial for community welfare. Such involvement underscores the idea that women's work in the domestic sphere naturally extends to the public sphere, further blurring the lines between these traditionally distinct spaces.

The analysis of Damar Kurung paintings by Masmundari, therefore, reveals the central role that women play in Javanese society. Through their work, both in the home and in the public sphere, Javanese women contribute significantly to the economic and social development of their communities, all while maintaining and reinforcing their cultural identity. The dual roles of Javanese women are not seen as a burden but as an integral part of their lives, reflecting a deep connection between work, household responsibilities, and cultural values. Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings serve as a powerful testament to the strength and resilience of Javanese women, highlighting their ability to navigate multiple responsibilities while preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations.

Power Behind Powerlessness: The Myth of *Konco Wingking* for Javanese Women

The relationship between men and women in myth often mirrors the cultural values, social structures, and psychological tensions of a society. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach offers a powerful tool for uncovering the underlying binary oppositions in these myths, exploring how these differences are negotiated, and interpreting their cultural significance. He argued that myths reveal society's views on power dynamics, including those related to gender roles. In many cultures, including Javanese society, these myths reflect deep-seated notions about masculinity and femininity, strength and weakness, public and domestic roles.

In Javanese society, masculine qualities are often associated with strength, rationality, and dominance, while feminine qualities are linked to weakness, domesticity, and subordination. These traditional gender roles are encapsulated in *konco wingking*, which refers to the idea that women should remain behind their husbands, in the domestic sphere, taking care of the household. The term symbolizes the expectation that women should be subordinate, playing a supportive role rather than taking the lead.

Masmundari challenges these traditional views through her Damar Kurung paintings, particularly the work titled *Mbok Omah* (Fig. 7). Her paintings offer a nuanced perspective on the role and position of Javanese women, highlighting both the contradictions and the strength inherent in their societal roles. In *Mbok Omah*, for example, the mother is depicted as the central figure, larger and more dominant than the father. This visual narrative suggests that, contrary to the notion of *konco wingking*, women hold significant power within the family structure, not only as caregivers and nurturers but also as key figures in maintaining the social and economic stability of the household.



Fig. 7. Damar Kurung painting titled *Mbok Omah*
Source: Masmundari Family's archives, 2022

The depiction of *Mbok Omah* carrying many children on her head and back bears a visual resemblance to the *Nyai Brayut* puppet (Fig. 8). Unfortunately, *Nyai Brayut* puppets are not well-known, and the artifacts are becoming increasingly rare and hard to locate. This situation can be attributed to the impact of the past New Order government, which deemed *Nyai Brayut* puppets as a poor example for Indonesian families and irrelevant to modern times. Large families were negatively viewed,



Fig. 8. Various *Nyai Brayut* Puppets
Source: Jakarta Puppet Museum Collection, 2023

leading to a decline in the relevance and popularity of the *Nyai Brayut* puppet narrative. Traditional cultural practices, such as the celebration of large families in the *Nyai Brayut* puppet story, contradicted the ideology of the New Order government, resulting in a decrease in public acceptance of the *Nyai Brayut* puppet narrative. Consequently, *Nyai Brayut* puppets gradually faded and vanished from Javanese society.

However, Masmundari reinterpreted *Nyai Brayut* puppets as *Mbok Omah*, aiming to make the narrative in Damar Kurung more relevant and accepted by the wider community.

The Damar Kurung paintings, especially those by Masmundari, reflect a complex understanding of gender roles in Javanese society. While women are often expected to conform to traditional roles, these roles are not as straightforward as they might

seem. The concept of *kodrat*, plays a significant part in this dynamic. In Javanese culture, *kodrat* refers to the belief that certain roles and behaviors are divinely ordained and must be accepted as part of one's fate. This belief system places men and women in an unequal, asymmetrical relationship, where their roles are defined by spiritual and cultural expectations, as shared. Sri Anisatun, age 61, from Gresik says: "It is indeed so by *kodrat*. Since the beginning, when God created men and women, they have always been different and cannot be equated. Each has been given their own role. Humans are obliged to carry out their duties well."

However, within this framework, both men and women have opportunities to express themselves and exercise power, though in different ways. Women, particularly mothers, are seen as the center of the family and household. This central role gives rise to matrifocality, a term that describes the domination of women through their roles within the core family unit and the wider society. In Javanese culture, the mother is often regarded as the linchpin of the family, responsible not only for caring for and educating children but also for managing the household and even contributing to the family's economic well-being.

Javanese society's approach to power is closely aligned with the concept of soft power, as articulated by Foucault (*The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 167). Soft power refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. In the context of Javanese culture, women's power is often exercised subtly, through social interactions, diplomacy, and consensus-building. Rather than openly asserting their influence, Javanese women build power through their ability to navigate complex social hierarchies and maintain harmony within the family and community. This form of power is deeply rooted in Javanese cultural traditions, which emphasize the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in all aspects of life.

Foucault's concept of power further supports this understanding of Javanese women's roles. Power, according to him, is not simply imposed from above but is exercised through a complex network of relationships and practices (179). In this sense, Javanese women are not passive victims of patriarchal oppression but active participants in the negotiation of power within the social structure. Through their roles in the domestic sphere, they exercise a form of power that is both subtle and effective, shaping the dynamics of family life and, by extension, the wider society.

The power of Javanese women is deeply intertwined with the concepts of procreation, tranquility, and emotional management. The calm and patience radiated by a Javanese mother extend to all members of the household, ensuring family stability. In Javanese culture, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of inner calm and self-control, particularly for women. As shared by Mujiati Sulami, age 48, from Gresik: "There are times when I feel tired, bored, or stressed from the seemingly never-ending housework I have to do every day. But every time I *sholat* (pray), I am reminded that it is my obligation as a woman. I believe that the happiness of my husband, children, and family is the path to heaven." This is reflected in the concept of *sumarah*, a Javanese philosophical principle that emphasizes patience, acceptance, and surrender to God. *Sumarah* teaches that true strength lies in the ability to endure hardship with grace and to maintain inner peace in the face of adversity. For Javanese women, *sumarah* is not just a passive acceptance of their fate but a form of active engagement with their roles and responsibilities. By embodying this principle, they are able to exercise power in a way that is both culturally acceptable and personally fulfilling. This is particularly evident in the way Javanese women manage their domestic responsibilities. Despite the heavy burdens they often carry, they do so with a sense of purpose and dedication, finding strength in their ability to support their families and maintain harmony in the household.

Masmundari's personal experiences and the socio-political dynamics of Indonesia during former President Soehart's New Order regime heavily influenced her creative process. The New Order regime strategically used Javanese cultural values to build a stable political environment, often manipulating traditional arts to serve its ideological aims (Tickamyer, *Power, Change and Gender Relations* 1158). This manipulation of Javanese cultural identity was aimed at consolidating political power and control. The New Order regime attempted to redefine and homogenize Javanese culture, promoting a standardized version of Javanese identity that aligned with the regime's political goals. This process involved the strategic use of traditional arts, including Damar Kurung, as tools for promoting the regime's ideology.

The New Order regime also perpetuated the ideology of state ibuism, which emphasized women's roles as wives and mothers while allowing them to work outside the home due to educational opportunities and increasing demand for

cheap labor (Suryakusuma 89). State ibuisism is a concept that combines elements of traditional Javanese values with the Dutch colonial influence on gender roles. It promotes the idea that a woman's highest calling is to be a good wife and mother, while also contributing to the nation's development through her work. This ideology was instrumental in shaping the gender roles of women during the New Order period and continues to influence Indonesian society today.

The ideology of state ibuisism is closely related to the concept of "housewifization," a term coined by Maria Mies to describe the process by which women are relegated to the role of housewife, regardless of their actual contributions to the household and family (Suryakusuma 90). State ibuisism institutionalized this concept, emphasizing the role of women as complements and companions to their husbands, as mothers and educators of children, and as guardians of the household. While this ideology was designed to support the regime's political agenda, it also reinforced traditional gender roles, making it difficult for women to break out of the constraints imposed by these roles.

Despite the fall of the New Order regime, the values of state ibuisism continue to influence Indonesian society, particularly Javanese women. The persistence of these values reflects the deep-rooted nature of traditional gender roles in Javanese culture. For Javanese women, the difficulties and contradictions of life are seen as opportunities for personal growth and spiritual development (Kurtz 341). This perspective is rooted in the Javanese philosophy of life, which emphasizes the importance of balance and harmony in all aspects of life (Endraswara, *The Javanese Philosophy of Life* 195). In this context, the ability to accommodate contradictions is seen as a sign of strength, and the capacity to harmonize conflicting elements is considered a mark of true power.

The Damar Kurung painting *Mbok Omah* by Masmundari illustrates how Javanese women maintain control over daily life within a dominant patriarchal ideology. Instead of being oppressed, Javanese women negotiate their strategic roles and positions, operating their power from the domestic realm. This domestic power, which can be likened to the role of the puppeteer in *wayang* performances, allows women to subtly influence the public sphere, shaping the dynamics of their communities and families. The personal is indeed political as women's power is

manifested in the way they manage their households, raise their children, and support their husbands. This power is not always visible or recognized but is nonetheless real and significant.

Masmundari's work offers an alternative perspective on gender roles, promoting a more balanced and harmonious view of gender relations. Her art serves as a medium for reconciling the *konco wingking* myth, offering a vision of gender equality that is rooted in Javanese cultural values but also open to new possibilities.

The power of Javanese women, as depicted in Masmundari's Damar Kurung paintings, is complex and multifaceted. It is a power that operates within the constraints of traditional gender roles but also finds ways to transcend these constraints. Through their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers, Javanese women exercise a form of power that is both subtle and profound, shaping the dynamics of their families and communities in ways that are often overlooked but are nonetheless significant. The myth of *konco wingking*, far from being a simple reflection of patriarchal domination, is a site of negotiation and contestation, where women find ways to assert their agency and redefine their roles within the cultural framework of Javanese society. Masmundari's art, with its rich symbolism and themed portrayal of gender roles, provides a powerful commentary on the enduring relevance of these issues in contemporary Indonesian society.

Femininity as Power

To understand the role and status of women in Javanese society, we need to consider the nation's culture and history. Without taking these into account the cultural and historical background, our understanding of the position and function of Javanese women may be incomplete and inaccurate. Due to its feudal origins, Javanese culture is often viewed as undemocratic, characterized by centralization and a lack of egalitarianism. It can be challenging to recognize the concept of gender equality in this context. However, it is important to note that there is some level of gender equality in Javanese society, even though it places women and men in an imbalanced and unequal position. Conversely, in the Javanese context, power can stem from weakness, oppression, and unequal treatment within male-female interactions. In Javanese society, women who take on the roles of wives and mothers are central to the family and home, and their function has an impact on society. In Javanese

thought, the ability to control one's ego is not just a personal virtue but a source of social power – especially for women, whose strength often lies in maintaining harmony through emotional restraint and inner balance. Masmundari's paintings suggest that Javanese women can possess power without adopting masculinity or embracing modern, progressive models of female empowerment. Instead, they can leverage their femininity, composure, and capacity to exercise restraint in challenging situations.

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