

# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COASTAL SETTLEMENTS AND JAVANESE VERNACULAR ART: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF DAMAR KURUNG GRESIK

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# **EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COASTAL SETTLEMENTS AND JAVANESE VERNACULAR ART: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF DAMAR KURUNG GRESIK**

## **ABSTRACT**

Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands located between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Because of these geographical characteristics, marine activities play an essential role, which may be fulfilled with the support of ports and coastal settlements. Historically, Gresik, East Java, is an old port city that plays an important role in international trade. The interaction between foreigners and indigenous in economic transactions produces coastal settlements with unique life and culture. The development of local art and culture, particularly vernacular art, has been influenced by coastal settlements. Damar Kurung is a Gresik vernacular art that was declared as national intangible cultural heritage in 2017 because it represents collective memory and local knowledge values that are essential in building national identity. This study employs art historiography methodology, combining biographical interpretation approaches and formal analysis. This combination intends to develop a comprehensive understanding of Damar Kurung and its artists in the past, present, and future, including their relation to geographical context and coastal settlements. There are three types of research data: literature, oral traditions, and visual data. This method is aimed at analyzing the impact of coastal settlements on Damar Kurung. According to the findings of this study, the Gresik coastal settlement influenced Damar Kurung in terms of style, themes, methods, and materials. The paintings on the side of Damar Kurung reflect maritime traditions ranging from daily activities to mythology in coastal settlements. The coastal settlements of Gresik and Damar Kurung have a symbiotic relationship that impacts each other. Damar Kurung has historically been constructed by coastal communities and settlements into an captivating vernacular art. Damar Kurung, on the other hand, is historical evidence showing the Gresik coastal settlement's cultural identity. The evolution of Damar Kurung from craft to painting demonstrates Gresik society's flexibility to changing times. Damar Kurung, as an intangible cultural heritage, needs conservation efforts from many parties in order to establish an appreciative, interactive, and inclusive space for preserving Damar Kurung.

Keywords: Coastal Settlements, Damar Kurung, Gresik, Historiography, and Vernacular Art.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Human history and art always go hand in hand. History can be recorded through art, which can embody cultural values and social norms that prevailed in society in the past (Pang, Dong, & Wang, 2022). Art history plays an important role in society, not only to understand artifacts according to the rules of beauty but also to learn the stories and meanings behind a work of art that reflects the identity of the local community. By learning art history, it is possible to know how people worked and thought in the past and how it has changed in the world today (Haputhanthri, 2021).

Indonesia has a rich and diverse artistry that encompasses a wide range of art forms, traditions and histories. One of them is vernacular art: a form of artistic expression derived from the daily traditions of a particular community that reflects its group identity through its values and beliefs. In this study, the definition of vernacular refers to everyday realities that are common, natural, unplanned, informal and indicative of rural life. The term vernacular is widely used for linguistic and architectural studies, as Oxford Learner's

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Dictionaries shows: 1. a language spoken by ordinary people in a particular country or region, 2. an architectural style used for ordinary houses, rather than large public buildings (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2023, 2023). In the study of art history, there is always an engagement of artistic practices with the dynamics of everyday life, both in urban and rural contexts. Vernacular art focuses on the continuity of history which is always related to the time and place where society grows (Portnova, 2022). Vernacular art is a genre of visual art made by self-taught artists who tend to work outside of art academies and commercial galleries, they come from ordinary people who learn the arts themselves or inherited from their ancestors for generations, who often rely on their own experimentation or local knowledge about how to make things (Klekot, 2022). Vernacular art displays the identity of a minority community through songs, dances, painting, textiles, clothing, traditional houses, ceramics, sculpture, language, mythology, folklore, and craft (Portnova, 2022). Vernacular art plays an important role in society because of its contribution to the culture, education, and economy of the community that can foster cultural identity, which in turn can gradually become national identity (Shimshon-Santo, 2007).

Indonesian vernacular paintings come in a variety of styles and themes, ranging from the visual narratives of the *Kamasan* and *Pita Maha* from Bali, *Wayang Beber* from Central Java to the romantic-naturalistic works of Raden Saleh. But not many are familiar with Damar Kurung, a vernacular art from Gresik, East Java. This is because Gresik is known as a bustling industrial and trading city. Yet history tells us that Gresik has a valuable history as one of the most important international ports during the Majapahit Kingdom (Qurtuby S. , 2003). The important role as a royal port had an impact on the progress of civilisation and culture in Gresik due to social interaction with various nations that encouraged the exchange of information and transfer of knowledge. Gresik became a coastal city with a diverse population, consisting of Javanese people, Chinese, European and Muslims (from Indian, Arab, and Persia) (Hutama, 2018). Interaction with various nations makes their characteristics more open-minded to new ideas and knowledge, more egalitarian, religious and less concerned with social status. The characteristics shaped by its diverse geographical location, cultural heritage and historical background have resulted in Gresik's unique traditional practices and artistic expressions.

Java's coastal settlements play an important role in shaping the artistic expression of Javanese society. Gresik has been an important centre of trade and cultural exchange for centuries, bringing traders, sailors and travellers from different parts of the world. As a result, diverse ideas, knowledge, skills and artistic expressions converged in the settlements. One important influence of Java's northern coastal settlements is reflected in traditional arts and crafts that symbolise the Javanese connection to their maritime heritage. Damar Kurung is vernacular art originating in Gresik, East Java. It is a lantern craft made from bamboo and oilpaper (*dluwang*). Terminologically, Damar Kurung refers to fire (*damar*) that is enclosed in brackets (*kurung*). Damar Kurung can be found only at certain times, throughout the month of *Ramadan*. At that time, people's houses or highways in Gresik were decorated with Damar Kurung. The uniqueness of this lantern lies in the pictures that adorn the brackets. Each image is created with a visual narrative approach that discusses the socio-cultural dynamics of the people of Gresik about the scene of a fishing village and the daily life in it. Not only does Damar Kurung showcase the coastal theme of Gresik society, but it also reflects cultural acculturation through the

techniques, materials, color choices, pigments, and tools facilitated by these settlements. Loza (2008) states that vernacular art not only functions as artifact but can also serve as visual representation of history, tradition, and community values that allow people to connect with their ancestral heritage. Loza argues that through an appreciative attitude towards vernacular art, people can develop a deeper understanding of their historical roots, thus strengthening their collective identity and sense of belonging (Loza, De Guzman, & Jose, 2008).

This vernacular art has been known to the Gresik people for a long time; even the literature and community leaders mention that Damar Kurung has existed since the 16th century, the time when Sunan Prapen (a descendant of Sunan Giri, one of the members of the *wali songo*) ruled *Giri Kedaton* (now Gresik) (Koeshandari, 2009). This was the golden age for the spread of Islam in Java by the *wali songo* (nine Muslim saints who spread Islam throughout Java Island) (Qurtuby S. , 2003). The history of Gresik records that during the Majapahit Kingdom, Gresik was one of the important ports connecting international and national traders and sailors (Qurtuby S. A., 2009). Gresik's strategic position on the north coast of Java (*Pasisiran*) opened up wide opportunities for meeting various nations and cultures for a long time (Nasution & Himawan, 2021). The meeting of indigenous people with immigrants from various nations has encouraged the creation of various forms of cultural acculturation. That is why Damar Kurung has a unique and artistic visual expression because its visual appearance, form and painting method combine elements of Chinese, Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic cultures (Putra Utama, 2017). Damar Kurung, as a vernacular art not only displays its aesthetics, but also contains visual narratives about the history, beliefs, values, and social norms of Gresik society. The images that adorn Damar Kurung tell a story that reflects the experiences and aspirations of the artist, which can then build a collective memory and over time be recognised as the cultural identity of the Gresik community. This vernacular art often draws inspiration from everyday events, religious beliefs and mythology that developed in the lower middle-class settlements in Gresik.

Thus, Damar Kurung is a unique and meaningful vernacular art that narrates the history of the Gresik community. According to the Indonesian government, Damar Kurung was declared a national intangible cultural heritage in 2017. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses a wide range of human endeavours that aim to create physical culture and usually supply the ceremonial needs of society ( Idris, Mustaffa, & Yusoff, 2016). Idris adds that intangible cultural heritage can be a variety of knowledge and skills that are recognised by the community and passed down from generation to generation following the changing times. This fosters a sense of shared ownership while encouraging respect for cultural diversity and human creativity ( Idris, Mustaffa, & Yusoff, 2016). Preserving intangible cultural heritage provides significant benefits to national development, creates a harmonious social atmosphere and globally builds more tolerant relationships (Lenzerini, 2011). Compared to tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage is more easily endangered by the consequences of globalization, industrialization, migration, and war or armed conflict (Lenzerini, 2011). However, intangible and tangible cultural heritage remain interrelated because they both represent strong symbols and cultural identities in the form of objects and verbal forms ( Idris, Mustaffa, & Yusoff, 2016). Intangible cultural heritage has flexible and adaptive characteristics that allow it to be passed down from generation to generation and continuously deconstructed in order

to adapt to changing times (Chen, 2022).

This study hypothesizes that coastal settlements in Gresik had a significant impact on the style, themes, methods, and materials of Damar Kurung. The second hypothesis is that the cultural background of the settlements where Damar Kurung is made influences its evolution and adaptation. Damar Kurung is adaptable to changes in context and culture throughout time, mirroring characteristics of coastal people who are similarly adaptable and open-minded. Damar Kurung's evolution has benefited attempts to conserve it as a cultural heritage.

The following are the research objectives:

1. To find the relationship between coastal settlements and Javanese vernacular art, in this case Damar Kurung from Gresik. Therefore, it is important to investigate the historical, cultural and geographical factors that have shaped Javanese vernacular art.
2. To outline a chronology of the evolution and adaptation of Damar Kurung, along with its causes and impacts and contemporary issues.
3. To evaluate the preservation efforts and contemporary significance of Damar Kurung involving various parties ranging from the community to the government. Especially considering that Damar Kurung has been designated as a national intangible cultural heritage.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Historically, the north coast of Java has long been a centre of trade and cultural exchange of people from various nations through the presence of ports and coastal settlements. These cultural exchanges influenced artistic practices in Java. Coastal settlements were crucial in facilitating the spread of artistic ideas and skills. The influx of traders, sailors and migrants from around the world exposed Javanese artists to new styles, methods and materials. This cultural exchange supported the growth and evolution of Javanese vernacular art.

Robson (1981) concluded that the ornamental designs of Java's coastal settlements (especially in mosques) are evidence of the interaction of various cultures and nations that occurred in the 16th century due to the expanding maritime silk trade. These ornamental designs are different from those found in the hinterland of Java (Robson, 1981). Arps (2023) also concluded the same thing as Robson about the typical ornamental designs of Javanese coastal settlements, especially in Semarang, Central Java (Arps, Muslifah, & Kurniawati, 2023). Meanwhile, Idham (2018) discusses coastal batik (wax and dye textile) which has bright colours and varied motifs, different from inland batik from Yogyakarta and Solo. The uniqueness of coastal batik is mentioned by Idham as the result of synchronisation between local nature and the social situation of the community (Idham, 2018). Triyanto (2016) researched the art of Buraq: a puppet procession art from Brebes, west of the north coast of Java island, Central Java Province. Buraq is depicted as a female-headed and horse-bodied creature with a pair of wings that reflects the combination of Javanese, Chinese and Islamic cultural elements (Triyanto, Rokhmat, Mujiyono, & Sugiarto, 2016). Previous studies that discuss vernacular art in coastal Java mostly focus on architecture along with the interior and ornamental design elements in it.

In terms of coastal settlements, there are several researchers who discuss its connection with the creation of art and culture. Cayarini (2023) mentioned that settlement patterns, building orientation directions, landform changes, gender-based space utilisation and cultural spaces in coastal settlements are influenced by socio-cultural aspects (Cayarini, Nugroho, & Asikin, 2023). Setyobudi (2018) stated that Javanese cultural characteristics in coastal settlements are oriented towards Islamic values that can be utilised for student character building through art education for elementary to junior high school students (Setyobudi, 2018). Heriyawati (2022) discusses the appreciation of maritime art in the context of literacy of people living in coastal settlements, that appreciators with maritime cultural backgrounds are more expressive in stating opinions in contrast to appreciators with mountain/inland cultural backgrounds (Heriyawati & Wita, 2022).

Overall, Java's coastal settlements have a close relationship with the arts, especially in the areas of ornamental design, architecture, batik and wayang performance. Foreign influences brought by traders from various nations affected the styles, techniques and materials of these arts. Previous studies have examined the factors of geography and coastal settlements on Javanese vernacular art, but have focused more on coastal settlements in Central Java, none specifically on coastal settlements in East Java. The same applies to the art objects studied. Previous studies have mostly discussed vernacular art in the form of batik, architecture, ornament design and wayang. However, not many have discussed vernacular art in the form of crafts and paintings. There is a gap in existing knowledge about the influence of coastal settlements on vernacular arts in the form of crafts and paintings in Gresik, East Java. In light of this, researchers have become increasingly interested in the influence of coastal settlements on the development and evolution of Damar Kurung in Gresik. D'Alleva (2005) theorises that it is important to understand the geographic, social, political and cultural context in which art is created so that it is possible to explore the meaning and significance of art (D'Alleva, 2005)

Several studies have focused on art objects in coastal settlements of Central Java: ornamental designs in Javanese coastal mosques (Robson, 1981), colourful coastal batik (Idham, 2018), Buraq puppet from coastal Brebes, Central Java (Triyanto, Rokhmat, Mujiyono, & Sugiarto, 2016), and art education (Setyobudi, 2018). One study discussed coastal settlements in Banyuwangi, East Java, and one study in Bandung, West Java (Cayarini, Nugroho, & Asikin, 2023; Heriyawati & Wita, 2022). All of these studies show consistent evidence that coastal settlements have a strong influence on the shaping and development of Javanese vernacular art. Unfortunately, research on the influence of coastal settlements on vernacular art in Central Java is more popular, while in East Java it is still lacking. In terms of artefacts, research into Javanese crafts and paintings is also lacking. This research will therefore investigate the influence of coastal settlements on Javanese vernacular art, particularly Damar Kurung from Gresik. The process of investigation also includes analysing the evolution and adaptation of Damar Kurung over time so that preservation efforts can be identified and evaluated.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses an art historiography methodology with a combination of biographical interpretation and formal analysis approaches. Art historiography is a historical study that studies the identification, interpretation and criticism of art objects (Paolicchi, 2021). The first approach is biographical interpretation, which is an approach that focuses on the

biography of the art subject who made the artifact and the various things behind the artist's life and creative process (D'alleva, 2005). Formal analysis, is an approach that focuses on the formal elements of a work of art and its various transformations over time (D'alleva, 2005). This combination of approaches aims to develop a thorough understanding of Damar Kurung in the context of the past, present and future suggestions.

The research data consisted of three things: literature, oral tradition, and visual data. Literature data was obtained from various writing studies published in books, journals, monographs, mass media and other reliable sources. Oral tradition data was obtained from interviews with the artist's family and community leaders in Gresik including artists, cultural figures, religious leaders, conservation communities, collectors and entrepreneurs. Visual data was obtained through documentation of Damar Kurung, both repros from various collections and those documented by the author herself.

This methodology is focused on understanding the influence of coastal settlements on vernacular art in Gresik, East Java. The object of this research is determined in accordance with the research objectives, namely coastal settlements and Damar Kurung as art objects, Masmundari and Gresik people as art subjects. Both play an important role in building the historical analysis behind a work of art. The procedures conducted to achieve the objectives are: the first step was the collection of various literary, verbal, and visual data related to the topic of this study (heuristics). The second step was verification and internal criticism to test the validity of the data by comparing the findings. The third step is the interpretation of historical facts and sources through parsing and synthesizing. The last step is art historiography, which involves writing a coherent and comprehensive art history (Santosa, 2020). These stages are carried out to benefit researchers, students, historians, designers and artists in understanding, identifying, describing, interpreting, and evaluating the historical development of Damar Kurung by placing it in its sociocultural context during various historical periods, especially during the artist's lifetime. Art historiography helps readers understand why the context behind a work of art occurred and how they were interpreted (Mijić & Parzer, 2022). In short, through art historiography, not only examine the art object itself, but also the broader aspects that form the historical record of the evolution of society itself (Liu, 2016).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Life and Work of Masmundari: a Biography of an Old Lady Artist from a Slum Coastal Settlement**

Masmundari (1904–2005) was an old lady artist who lived in Kroman village, a slum coastal settlement in Gresik but had the expertise to make Damar Kurung (see Fig. 1). Historically, Gresik played as an important trading centre during the Majapahit Kingdom in 1293-1527 along with Gujarat, China, Arabia, and Persia, Bengal (Shaikh, 2020). However, over time the international trade routes shifted further and further away from Gresik. Moreover, the presence of European colonials and the opening of the Suez Canal, Gresik increasingly lost the strategic position it had long played. This led to a decline in maritime trade activities which also had an impact on Gresik's economic decline (Shimada, 2019). Since the 1970s Gresik has developed into an industrial city with the expansion of industrial estates. The rapid growth of industry in Gresik has caused various settlement problems, such as water and air pollution, making Gresik increasingly

regressive (Idris, Purnomo, Sismat, Isma'il, & Sringernyuang, 2021). The pollution problem, which is not supported by adequate government regulations, causes settlements in Gresik to become polluted and slum. Weak regulations are caused by Gresik's unstable political conditions (Rahmi, Setiawan, & Ismanto, 2020). In terms of morphology, Gresik is dominated by multi-ethnic settlements, such as Arab, Chinese, ex-Dutch colonial, Javanese and Madurese. Although it can campaign for cultural diversity and social cohesion, multi-ethnic settlements have the potential to often experience social tensions and conflicts due to differences in cultural practices, language, values and beliefs (Ariestadi D. , Antariksa, Wulandari, & Surjono, 2017). The multiple problems in Gresik's coastal settlements mean that people have low incomes, inadequate housing, poor sanitation and no access to health and education services. This was Masmundari's daily reality.



Figure 1. Documentation of Masmundari painting Damar Kurung  
Source: Bentara Budaya Exhibition Catalog, 1987

Masmundari as a member of the community living in coastal slums is involved in various economic activities, including fishing, small-scale trade, manual labour, and informal sector work. Throughout her life, Masmundari has done various jobs, such as helping to prepare sails for fishing because her husband is a fisherman, has been a stone-breaking labourer, made crafts and finally became a Damar Kurung maestro. However, economic challenges in coastal slums such as limited economic opportunities, environmental pressures, inadequate government regulations, vulnerability to disasters, and high living costs have always made it difficult for Masmundari to improve her economic welfare and live a decent life. Therefore, Masmundari does various things to fulfil her needs, even though she was very old.

Masmundari started making Damar Kurung at the age of ten, learning from her parents who worked as *wayang* puppeteers and Damar Kurung artisans. Before Masmundari, her sister and uncle also made these lanterns (Koeshandari, 2009). The uniqueness of Masmundari's work lies in the themes of her paintings, which are inspired by the daily lives of Gresik people as a member of the coastal community using traditional painting techniques. Masmundari's artistic practice in making Damar Kurung fulfils the rules of vernacular art, that she is a self-taught artist, her creative ideas are inspired by everyday life, executed using traditional techniques that she has acquired from generation to generation, its visualisation is narrative and contains utilitarian aspects (Jurriëns, 2023).

At first, Damar Kurung functioned as an economic commodity sold in traditional markets, in cemetery areas, or during folk markets or festivals, but since Masmundari exhibited her work at Bentara Budaya Jakarta in 1987, Damar Kurung has increased in value to become a fine art object targeted by collectors. Responding to the public's assessment, a young painter from Gresik, Imang A.W., guided Masmundari in increasing the value of her artwork by reorienting Damar Kurung from craft to painting. This transformation had the effect of increasing the marketing value of Damar Kurung in the Indonesian art market (Indrakusuma, 2003). Since her first exhibition in 1987, Masmundari and Damar Kurung have been increasingly recognised by the public. From the 1990s to the early 2005s, Masmundari consistently exhibited her works. In fact, in one of her exhibitions at the Senayan Convention Centre Jakarta in 1991, President Soeharto and his family met and bought paintings by Masmundari (see Fig. 2). Before her death, Masmundari had one more exhibition at Bentara Budaya Jakarta on March 17-26, 2005. The exhibition succeeded in bringing Masmundari as a female artist icon in the world of art in Indonesia. Masmundari's struggle to preserve the vernacular art of Damar Kurung received several awards, including a certificate of appreciation from the Regent of Gresik as a National Achievement Artist in 1991, the Kartini Award from the Radison Plaza Suite Hotel in 1996, the 1991 Art Award from the Tugu Park Foundation, and the 2002 Award from Governor Imam Utomo as a Creator Artist in the field of Fine Arts (Indrakusuma, 2003).



Figure 2. Masmundari with the 2nd President of Indonesia, Soeharto.  
Source: Bentara Budaya Exhibition Catalog, 1987

Masmundari's journey to bring Damar Kurung into the Indonesian art world did not always go smoothly, it was full of struggles that not only made Masmundari sad but also disrupted her physical health. Before being recognized as the maestro of Damar Kurung, Masmundari's life was already complicated by family and economic problems. Based on interviews with Rokayah, Masmundari lived with her family in poor conditions in a slum settlement. Sadiman, Masmundari's father, works as a fisherman and *wayang* puppeteer who has to support his wife and four children: Masmundari, Masriatun, Maseh, and Masmunindri. However, his work as a *wayang* puppeteer is only done once a year, mainly during the *Sedekah Bumi* tradition ceremony held by the Gresik residents. This tradition is held as an expression of gratitude from village fishermen for the fish caught during the dry season. Since the ceremony is held once a year, Sadiman does not make much of a profit. The difficult economic conditions caused Masmundari's parents to seek a way out through debt at several moneylenders. Economic hardship and mental stress due to debts during her lifetime caused Masmundari's parents to fall ill, and in quick succession, both

passed away. Soon after, close relatives who lived in the same house also died, including Masmundari's biological sister and Kiai Untung (a relative of Masmundari's parents), who taught her to make Damar Kurung.

The geography of the settlement and the cultural background shape the personality traits of coastal Javanese. Some Indonesianists claim that although the majority of Javanese are Muslims, Islam in Java is a syncretic religion, which is a fusion of Islam, Hindu-Buddhism and indigenous beliefs (Geertz, 1976; Ricklefs, 2008; Mulder, 2005; Hefner, 2008). The daily life of Javanese both in the coastal and the inland areas is always closely related to spiritual practices and rituals. Hence, conducting ritual traditions on a regular basis is a natural thing for the Javanese. Similarly, in Gresik, there are various spiritual practices and rituals to honour certain moments, such as the 7th month of pregnancy, birth, marriage, funeral and religious holidays. Gresik is no exception, there are also many traditional rituals that are held regularly, such as welcoming the fasting month for Muslims. Muslims in Gresik and in Java in general are making many preparations to welcome the fasting month and Eid al-Fitr. Masmundari sells Damar Kurung during the fasting month of *Ramadan*, specifically when the *padusan* tradition is held (see Fig. 3). *Padusan*, or *megengan*, is a ritual of praying to deceased relatives and cleaning their graves (Mibtadin & Rosidin, 2023). This annual tradition is welcomed with joy by the people of Gresik, so the graves are crowded with visitors and vendors selling various supplies to clean them, including Damar Kurung to be placed on the cleaned grave. Before Damar Kurung was known as it is today, this traditional lantern was originally used as a lighting device at the graves of relatives or family or ancestors. In many Asian cultures, especially China, lanterns are often used during funeral rituals. Asian beliefs regard fire and lanterns as tools to guide and illuminate the spirits' path to the afterlife (Lobar, Youngblut, & Brooten, 2006). Lanterns that are lit, released into the sky or river, or placed on graves symbolise respect for those who have passed away. Islam also recognises a culture of light through lanterns. The use of lanterns during Ramadan is a common tradition for Muslims in Egypt and Arabia (El-Said, & Parman, 1993). They celebrate the arrival of *Ramadan* by parading with lanterns or decorating their terraces and balconies with lanterns. In Islamic culture, lanterns are used as decorative objects and lighting devices in a secular context, as well as symbols of spirituality in a religious context (El-Said, & Parman, 1993). Therefore, the tradition of placing Damar Kurung on family graves is a common tradition in Gresik. Masmundari only sells Damar Kurung during the fasting month because she believes in the myth that selling outside the set time can bring harm to herself and her family. The deaths of two of her siblings, Masriatun and Maseh are believed to be the result of disobeying this myth, even though both siblings had helped make Damar Kurung. Thus, it was impossible for Masmundari to produce a lot of Damar Kurung and make a large profit during the once-a-year festival. But finally good fortune came to Masmundari, her persistence in making Damar Kurung made her known as the old lady artist of Damar Kurung to a national scale until today.



Figure 3. The atmosphere of Damar Kurung sales in the *Padusan* tradition  
Source: Damar Kurung Institute Archives Documentation, 2012

### Coastal Settlements and Javanese Vernacular Art: Interactions and Influence

Initially, port cities along the northern coast of Java, described by Gresik (*Ce-cun*), Tuban (*Tu-fan*), Surabaya (*Su-Ju-mai*), Lasem (*Lao Sam*), Semarang (*Toa-lang*), and Jepara (*Ju Mara*), were under the rule of the Majapahit Kingdom, which had existed for more than three hundred years (Kurniawan, 2017). However, in the 14th century, when the influence of Islam grew stronger, the Demak Kingdom was led by Raden Patah (also known as *Jimbun*, a Chinese Muslim) (Berg, 1955). Before the Majapahit Kingdom emerged, Gresik was the most important port among these places. Gresik was born a trading city because of its strategic position. Gresik was a port city, and its position on the north coast of the Java Sea made it a major shipping lane for domestic and international trade. Gresik's geographical and ecological development had an impact on its socio-cultural development. Samudera Pasai, Aceh, Malacca, Demak, Banten, Jepara, Surabaya, Ternate, Banda, Gowa-Makassar, Banjarmasin, and Palembang are some of the port cities and royal centers equivalent to Gresik port (Mustakim, 2019). Large and small traders from several foreign nations as well as from *Nusantara*' kingdoms came to these ports. One of the foreign nations that massively came to Java was China. The Chinese emigrants lived in settlements along the north coast of Java, including Gresik and Surabaya (Mills, 1970). Qurtuby even explained that the Chinese emigrants were Muslims (Qurtuby S. , 2003). In fact, these foreign traders have established villages around ports. Because of these traders' activities, port cities formed ethnic villages with the approval of the port ruler and *syahbandar*. Not only trade interactions, marriages between migrants or foreigners and natives also contribute to shaping the culture of a region (Meliono, 2011). The bustling harbor enabled various encounters that resulted in the exchange of technology and information, as well as art and culture. W. P. Goeneveldt's research called "Nusantara in Chinese Records" provides detailed records of Chinese encounters in maritime trade and migration to the Southeast Asian region from 1413 to 1436 (Ubaedillah, 2023). Indirectly, this encounter left a legacy of knowledge in the social, economic, religious, and cultural fields (Tiffin, 2017). The Chinese immigrants came to Java with their knowledge and technology about paper (*dluwang*) and calligraphy, giving the Javanese the opportunity to learn about the art and culture of writing or painting, which was initially limited to oral only. Meanwhile, the Javanese people already had beliefs in Hindu-Buddhism, Islam, *Kejawen*, animism and dynamism. The interaction between the two is highly possible to result in the invention of a lighting device, later known as Damar Kurung.

The long interaction with various nations in Gresik encouraged the development of multi-ethnic settlements. The foreigners and the natives have different cultural backgrounds that led to the realisation of specific settlements, building typologies and communal spaces. Based on the urban archaeological records of Islamic Mataram, settlements in Gresik

include Chinatowns in coastal areas, Arab and Pancikan settlements, as well as indigenous Javanese and Madurese with building typologies that are adaptations of colonial buildings that have adapted to Chinese, Arab and coastal Javanese cultures (Ariestadi, Antariksa, Wulandari, & Surjono, 2016; Ariestadi D. , Antariksa, Wulandari, & Surjono, 2017; Ariestadi D. , Antariksa, Lisa, & Surjono, 2018). Meanwhile, the concept of communal space in Gresik is based on a combination of multi-ethnic concepts of entrepreneurship and religiosity. As was done by Sunan Giri and Nyi Ageng Pinatih, important Islamic leaders who also played a role in Gresik's trade. Sunan Giri was one of the most important religious and political leaders along with the other *wali songo* figures in Java in the 16th century. Sunan Giri was successful not only in the religious aspect, but also in establishing trade in Gresik. He was raised by Nyai Ageng Pinatih, who was a harbour master in Gresik. She was a wealthy Muslim businesswoman and was entrusted by the Majaphit Kingdom to create and organise maritime trade traffic in Gresik (Siswayanti, 2021).

Vernacular art is a branch of art that refers to artistic practices and expressions created by ordinary people (not professional artists) and its creative ideas reflect the daily life of a community (Chotpradit, 2018). These daily activities include everything from social interactions, landscapes, to religious rituals and historical events. The definition of ordinary people in this case also includes people from marginalised groups, people from the lower middle class, working class, women's and elderly communities. Vernacular art is closely related to the culture of the local community, both in terms of themes and materials (Jurriëns, 2023). The skills of these creators are usually acquired from family heritage through generations, without formal art training or education. The key concept of vernacular art is its ability to capture local cultural values into collective memory and community identity. In the art canon, vernacular art was once underestimated due to its unique visual expression and difference compared to 'high' art in the Western perspective. But today, curators and academics appreciate vernacular art for its aesthetic quality, authenticity and cultural significance. Appreciating vernacular art also means recognising the diversity and creativity of marginalised communities (Lee, 2015).

Damar Kurung fulfils all the definitions and characteristics of vernacular art mentioned by previous researchers. Damar Kurung was made by Masmundari, an old lady artist from a slum coastal settlement in Gresik. She comes from a lower class and is marginalised, has never had a general or artistic education, is even illiterate and has no signature, each of her artworks is marked with thumbprint ink. Masmundari acquired the knowledge and skills to make Damar Kurung from her family. The themes of her works are related to maritime traditions that often happen in Gresik, such as fishing, sailing, religious rituals, art performances, traditional markets and mythological stories. One of Gresik's signature rituals is *Sedekah Bumi*. This ritual is an expression of gratitude from the Javanese people to God or the earth or sea and all the ruling entities who have controlled the universe so that the Javanese people have a bountiful harvest. Historically, *Sedekah Bumi* is a blend of indigenous beliefs (animism and dynamism) with Islam, although today it is more dominated by Islam. People come together to bring various crops and sea products arranged in the shape of a mountain, carried on boats and then thrown into the sea as offerings to God. About the traditional market in Gresik, one of the main commodities is

milkfish. Therefore, Masmundari often painted market scenes showing milkfish trading activities. Even today, there is still a tradition of milkfish auction that is participated by fishermen from all over Java Island. The coastal mythology that appear in Damar Kurung are *Raja Mina* or *Gajah Mina* (the god of the sea) and *Nyonya Muluk* (a character from Masmudari's imagination: a woman with wings).

Damar Kurung as a vernacular art refers to the coastal geographical and cultural context that distinguishes it from other Javanese vernacular arts. The colour palette used in Damar Kurung is derived from natural materials usually used for food. The choice of colours tends to be bold, vibrant and contrast, without the use of dark-light gradation techniques. The visual composition is carefully arranged to guide the viewer to understand the story. This composition is called visual narrative, where visual elements are combined to create a story. The strength of this technique is that it allows anyone with any cultural and linguistic background to 'read' and understand the narrative of an artwork (Cohn, 2019).

From 1987 and onwards, Masmundari more often made Damar Kurung in the format of paintings, rather than crafts. This was due to the changing needs and appreciation of the public for artworks. The government, curators, museums, galleries and collectors often asked Masmundari to make paintings. Although the format has changed, Masmundari still uses traditional techniques and themes. Each painting is split vertically into three to four scenes. All figures, be it humans, animals, plants, houses and vehicles are made in a decorative stylised style. This style is also used in *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) and *wayang beber* (rolled puppets), where each figure is shown with the whole body in side view. There are no facial expressions, only body gestures. Masmundari's visual form does not recognize perspective (Koeshandari, 2009). The entire object is painted by lining it up to the side or sliding it up using a dividing line. To emphasise the main character, the size is made larger. Although it is a painting, it does not mean that it cannot create a dynamic impression. Masmundari creatively creates a dynamic or moving impression in her paintings through the presence of symbols. Symbols such as arrows, zigzag lines, and triple dots are painted on the empty plane. The rhythm and movement in the painting can be seen through expressive images. The zigzag line at the top of the picture plane or on the roof of the house means that the scene happens in the evening or at night. A triple dot is a visualization of the sound echo. The arrow is a visualization of the movement of wind circulation, usually indicates that the scene happens outside. The visual features of Damar Kurung as coastal vernacular art are in line with the definition made by Wright (1991), that coastal vernacular art often reflects simplicity, honesty and innocence. The artist applies techniques that have been learnt over generations, such as flat visual composition, without perspective and lack of shadows. The figures are made in a simple style but still emphasise complex decorative elements (Wright, 1991).

In her creative process, Masmundari shows human figures that represent the sociocultural conditions of her time in the 1990 until 2000s. Male figures are depicted wearing long or short pants, sometimes with Madurese caps or *udeng*. While female figures are depicted wearing dresses, *kembens* (traditional female torso wrap), and *jariks* (traditional cloth used as a sarong or waistcloth), some are wearing *kerudung* (a type of headscarf worn by Muslim women to cover their hair and neck) or *mukena* (is a type of loose-fitting robe worn by Muslim women in Indonesia during prayer). Meanwhile, children are depicted with smaller bodies, sometimes not wearing clothes, only shorts and barefoot.

Masmundari also paints the conditions of industrialization that happens in Gresik, marked by the objects of bicycles, cars, delmans, rickshaws, helicopters, and even dredge trucks (bego excavators). As explained by Harmon, vernacular art in general has the same characteristics, using repetitive patterns, contrasting and vibrant colors, tending to be decorative, and using techniques that usually reflect local cultural traditions (Harmon, 2023). Similar to Harmon, Wartyo also wrote about the definition and characteristics of vernacular art contained in Damar Kurung, that developed in villages outside the palace circle or art centers that supported the emergence of high culture, simple, spontaneous, honest and responsive (Wartyo, 2014).

### **Preservation and Contemporary Significance**

At first, Imang A.W., a young painter, guided Masmundari to reorient Damar Kurung. Masmundari, as the older generation, tends to uphold the principles and values passed down by her ancestors, while Imang A.W., as the younger generation, tends to be open-minded and flexible with the changing times. Their encounter contributed to a change in the perception of art as a commodity. At first, Masmundari saw Damar Kurung as a commodity to fulfill economic needs only, but since Imang A.W.'s presence, Damar Kurung is not only seen as an economic commodity but also as a commodity of social status. Since turning into painting, Damar Kurung is no longer sold on the side of the road or in front of the tomb during the *padusan* tradition, but in galleries and art museums attended by people from the upper class. Damar Kurung has become a prestigious work of art that can be installed and enjoyed at any time, without waiting for the fasting month of *Ramadan*. The impact of industrialization made the people of Gresik more financially prosperous, so the demand for tertiary products increased. This demand encouraged Masmundari to continue creating Damar Kurung paintings to meet the needs of this new audience. On the one hand, this allowed Masmundari to continue to innovate and conduct greater artistic experimentation to explore new techniques, styles, media, and ideas that were not previously done within the confines of craft practice. The symbolism and stylization in Damar Kurung have not changed significantly, only the themes of the story have become more diverse in accordance with life when Masmundari lived. The collaboration between Imang A.W. and Masmundari that caused the shift of Damar Kurung from craft to painting is a manifestation of contemporary significance. Contemporary significance refers to ways of understanding the importance or relevance of something from the past in the current situation (Erdmann, 2017).

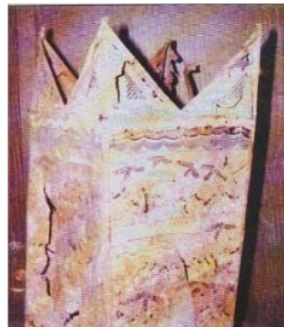


Figure 4. Damar Kurung by Kiai Untung, Masmundari's uncle.  
Source: Exhibition Catalog Balai Sidang Senayan Jakarta, 1991

In its development, Damar Kurung went through various changes in techniques, methods and materials to adapt to the times. The first was paper lanterns (1600-1970s), technically still applying traditional painting methods with symbolism and stilation. The material used is waste paper made from cassava. The colouring uses food colouring with traditional colours such as red, yellow, blue, black and white. Lighting uses candles (see Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Damar Kurung from oiled paper with an oily wick  
Source: Personal documentation from Muzachim's collection, 2016

The second is the fibreglass or mica lantern (around 1999), which in terms of technique and method still uses traditional methods: symbolisation and stilation. The material is fibreglass or mica with a wooden frame. The lighting uses electric lights. The colouring is done with markers and more modern acrylic paints, so the selection of colours is more diverse (see Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Damar Kurung is made of mica with an electric lamp  
Source: <https://budaya-indonesia.org/Damar-Kurung>

The third is paintings, made by Masmundari in the years 1999 to 2000. In terms of techniques and methods, it still applies the same traditional methods. The materials used are drawing paper or canvas of a larger size, so that the scenes in each sequence are more varied and more events can be told. The colouring uses dyes that were commonly sold at the time, such as markers or paint (see Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Damar Kurung in the form of a two-dimensional painting  
Source: Oemar Zainuddin's collection, 2016

The shift of Damar Kurung from craft to painting can be attributed to several factors, mainly related to cultural, social, and economic changes. Urbanization and industrialization in Gresik in the 1990s became one of the reasons for the shift of Damar Kurung. Gresik society, which originally had a rural (maritime and agrarian) style, slowly turned into an urban society that tends to be individualistic and prioritizes personal expression. The industrialisation led to significant changes in lifestyles and tastes in Gresik. One of them is the growth of urban culture, which is driving the rise of new lifestyles and entertainment, such as art galleries that were previously unavailable in rural lifestyles. In response to this change, public art and art galleries emerged in urban settlements. This also has an impact on the appreciation behavior and tastes of people towards art.

On the other side, this transition resulted in a level of elitism and a social class gap. The commercialization of Damar Kurung as a painting has created a gap between those who are able and unable to collect. This creates difficulties for the inclusion and accessibility of art. Damar Kurung, as a painting, is so highly valued that it might restrict access for many, increasing the socioeconomic gap in art appreciation and consumption. As a result, the Gresik community has worked to remove these barriers through a variety of strategies, including public art installations, community-based festival projects, and digital archive platforms and virtual museums that focus on democratizing access to art.

Changes and shifts in art are common because art is a reflection of society. Damar Kurung's shift from craft to painting can be seen as a wider social change. As Gresik society undergoes transformation in terms of industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, the characteristics of the arts also evolve. Masmundari and other artists used Damar Kurung to participate in these transformations, express their ideas, and respond to Gresik society's dynamics.

Preservation initiatives must be done in response to changes in Damar Kurung during time that have the potential to obscure its importance as an intangible cultural heritage. Observing landmarks and public facilities in Gresik, it can be understood that the Gresik government is trying to provide appreciation space for Damar Kurung. Appreciation is an important matter in the art field because there is interaction and communication between artists and art lovers. Public space is the right space to create this appreciative atmosphere. The Gresik government's efforts to create appreciation spaces can be seen on the arterial roads in Gresik, which are equipped with Public Street Lighting (PSL) decorated with Damar Kurung. Not only arterial roads, but sidewalk lights and city park lights are also decorated with Damar Kurung.



Figure 8. Documentation of Damar Kurung in Gresik Regency Public Spaces

Source: Author's documentation

According to Henri Lefebvre's thoughts on *The Production of Space*, space is divided into three dimensions that are dialectically interconnected (Lefebvre, 2002). First is spatial practice; this concept points to the material dimension of social activities and interactions. Spatial practice, in analogy with the syntagmatic dimension of language, shows the

system resulting from the articulation and connection of elements or activities. The existence of Damar Kurung in the form of PSL and city park lights is able to present spatial practices that involve various five senses (especially vision). However, the efforts of the Gresik government have not yet reached the second and third dimensions in producing. The representation of space and spaces of representation that involve the experience of interpreting Damar Kurung as a national intangible cultural heritage. Indeed, Damar Kurung was originally a lighting tool, but this does not mean that no creative exploration was made to develop the values of Damar Kurung. The government tends to 'impose' the existence of Damar Kurung on public facilities without properly understanding the noble meaning of Damar Kurung. Moreover, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture has designated Damar Kurung as an intangible cultural heritage for its painting and reading techniques, not just its material properties.

Public Street Lighting (PSL) on arterial roads, sidewalks, and in city parks has the impression of 'preening' only. The efforts made by the Gresik government have not touched on the third dimension, spaces of representation, which concerns the symbolic dimension of space. According to Lefebvre, the space of representation is not related to a space but to a symbolic abstraction. Arterial roads where industrial trucks pass by are not able to become spaces of representation, as the meaning of Damar Kurung that depict the dynamics of coastal communities that are closely linked to their maritime traditions. Public space not only includes concrete physically by placing public art in it but also needs to consider the concept of thought and taste that presents an 'experience'.

Efforts to bridge the past, present, and future can also be made by organizing festivals. Festivals can encourage social cohesion in the community, which not only unites the community but also promotes mutual respect and creates a harmonious atmosphere. Since 2012, the Damar Kurung Festival has been regularly organized. The uniqueness of this arts festival lies in its participatory-based organization involving local communities and residents. Not only exhibiting the historiography of Damar Kurung and Masmundari's biography, this festival also involves various Gresik traditions, crafts and culinary. The high enthusiasm made this festival then held regularly every 1 to 2 years, with the location moving from one *kampoong* (a term for a small Javanese settlement) to another.

By presenting Damar Kurung Festival in *kampoong*, it opens up the greatest potential for the meaning and preservation of Damar Kurung, starting from the grassroots. The *kampoong* where the Damar Kurung Festival is held is one of the efforts to produce social spaces that not only focus on the first dimension (spatial practice), but also the second and third dimensions: the representation of space and spaces of representation. The *kampoong* is able to become a space where its residents discuss, negotiate, and associate themselves with the history of their ancestors and cultural identity through the processes of interaction, communication, and appreciation. The Damar Kurung Festival is a forum for the exchange of knowledge and ideology about the cultural identity of Gresik people in the midst of the onslaught of industrialization and economic needs.

The organization of the festival also has a good impact on economic progress. To this day, Damar Kurung has become an economic engine for the people of Gresik, encompassing various productive activities such as *batik* with Damar Kurung-inspired motifs, art gallery cafes, virtual museums, and other creative products inspired by Damar

Kurung. Intangible cultural heritage is a valuable economic resource that requires the involvement of many parties to preserve, especially the people who own the cultural heritage (Petronela, 2016). Efforts to improve and strengthen the local economy can be made by incorporating intangible cultural heritage into economic activities. Thus, the people of Gresik not only respect Damar Kurung as their cultural heritage, but they also utilise the traditional knowledge contained in it to make creative solutions to address current and future challenges.

Damar Kurung reflects the dynamics of coastal communities in Gresik settlements. Its open, adaptable and egalitarian personality makes Damar Kurung timeless. Both have a close relationship and influence each other. The people who live in Gresik's coastal settlements shape Damar Kurung's characteristics as a unique and captivating vernacular art. And vice versa, Damar Kurung is not only present as an artifact, but also as evidence of Gresik's coastal settlements' identities. The influence of coastal settlement on Damar Kurung is reflected in the themes of its paintings that depict maritime traditions. Damar Kurung does not simply display the geographical reality of coastal Java but also symbolises the relationship between Javanese society and its maritime heritage. Damar Kurung, as an intangible cultural heritage, has the ability to be preserved in many forms based on the relevance of the times. The preservation of Damar Kurung as an intangible cultural heritage is closely related to the sustainable development goals of promoting traditional art knowledge, encouraging creative community-based project initiatives and contributing to the overall well-being of the Gresik community by fostering a sense of pride in their ancestors' heritage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Vernacular art has always been a reflection of society, culture, and human experience wherever they settle. Gresik's coastal settlements have influenced Damar Kurung in terms of style, theme, method and materials. Damar Kurung was created by an old lady artist from a coastal slum settlement with a spontaneous and naive visual narrative style, created in a flat visual composition without perspective as also applied in wayang kulit and wayang beber, the colour palette is bold and vibrant reflecting the strong and open personality of the coastal people. The methods used are still the same traditional as Masmundari's ancestors, which is a fusion of Hindu-Buddhist, Chinese and Islamic cultures. The themes of the paintings that decorate the sides of Damar Kurung portray maritime traditions with fishermen busy fishing, milkfish markets, rituals worshipping the God or gods of the sea and the daily life of fishing kampoong. The materials are locally available in Gresik such as oil paper made from cassava, bamboo and natural dyes. The evolution of Damar Kurung from craft to painting is a form of adaptation to the times. The change of Damar Kurung does not necessarily make it extinct, instead it is easier to understand and preserve because of its flexible character in adjusting to the needs of the present and the future. Damar Kurung as an intangible cultural heritage requires preservation efforts from various parties, especially from the owner of the culture itself: the people of Gresik. The government, conservation communities, collectors, art institutions and the entire Gresik community need to work together to build an appreciative, interactive and inclusive space in preserving Damar Kurung.

# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COASTAL SETTLEMENTS AND JAVANESE VERNACULAR ART: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF DAMAR KURUNG GRESIK

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