

# REVITALISATION OF FEMALE GAMELAN'S PLAYERS IN SEBLANG OF BAKUNGAN

## *A STUDY CASE*

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**Abstract:** The local agricultural spirit of Osing people of Banyuwangi district, East Java produced many of various rites. These function as mediation between human community and supranatural forces to influence the fertility of soils even to guarantee the welfare of the community. *Seblang* is the oldest among these traditions, still kept and implemented by the villagers of Bakungan as a part of yearly village purification ceremony. The entity of woman as spiritual being associated to fertility and to the food-giving Mother Earth (*pertiwi*) and rice field goddess (*Mbok Srintani*) is essential in the *Seblang* ritual. Woman is also the preserver of local wisdom about ecological equilibrium as the part of the traditional agricultural worldview. In the last two decades myths, beliefs and discourses of *Seblang* changed, in parallel with the social-, cultural- ecological changes of the regional development led by Banyuwangi's post-reformation government. This changes modificate elements in the original implementation of this rite. One of these changes was the arbitrary exchange of the *Seblang*'s female gamelan's players by male ones five years ago. This paper analyzes how the changing power structures of center and periferic caused the marginalisation of female gamelan's players of *Seblang*, in a concrete way, how the dominant patriarchal class ignored the importance of female entity in the *Seblang* rite through the act of banishing the female gamelan's players. After five years of their banishment, in 2018 Bakungan women got the opportunity to join again as gamelan's player in *Seblang*. Present paper examines how the awareness of community about cultural competency the female gamelan's players changed positively after Bakungan women were able to articulate their need to participate as musicians in the *Seblang* rite. This new awareness presents the emerging self-image of Osing woman and forming a change in the earlier male-dominant perspective.

**Keywords:** *Seblang, Osing, rite, female entity, woman*

## INTRODUCTION

Banyuwangi is the largest district of East Java, cultural enriched by various ethnic groups living together there since the era of Dutch colonization. As the consequence of plantation farming and oversea trading which was dictated by VOC's interest, the historical territory of Blambangan became the new living scene of various emigrants from Madurese, Mataram (Javanese peoples from the Mataram empire of Central Java), Chinese, Arabic, Mandar, Bugis etc ethnic groups. Whereas in the nowadays discourse the Osings were referred as the original inhabitants of Banyuwangi. Lekkerkerker (1923) mentioned *oesingers* as different local communities with their own culture and language. Thus we have to distinguish two main discourses about the Osing entity. The first discourse declares Osing people as local inhabitants of Blambangan (the last Hindu state of Java situated on the eastern shores of the island). A part of Blambangan legitimate became Banyuwangi, and the Osing ethnic group after the almost complete eradication still survives. This discourse is supported by scientific platform of cultural anthropology, differentiates Osing based on the marks of their marriage system (endogamy), their indigenous architecture forms (*tikel balung, cerocogan, baresan*) along the type of settlement of their houses, and the custom of bride-thieving (*kawin colong*) which are still practiced among these Osing communities. The other discourse sees Osing as a subdivision of Javanese ethnic group and/or language, as it was the common practice until the 1970's when Osing language was 'born' as the part of emerging identical consciousness of local intellectuals. The growing pop industry through records and tapes of Banyuwangi songs, both traditional and modern

ones, plays important role in the expansion of Osing language or dialect, although other ethnic groups of Banyuwangi (Arps, 2010). The progress of Osing mobilisation also became the vehicle of regional hegemony building, especially under the regency of Abdullah Azwar Anas (2010-until now), in accordance with his political-economy goals. Empowering Osing culture through cultural megaprojects like Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival gave the priority of particular groups of Osing community to appropriate their necessity to find their cultural identity (Ikwan Setiawan, 2:2016). To avoid the polemic discourses which already were explained above, authors use the concept of Heru Saputra, who identifies Osing as one of the six cultural entities of East Java, namely: Arek, Tengger, Madurese, Mataram, Pendalungan, Osing. Heru Saputra remarks that the special characteristic of Osing is that they remain themselves as different, different from other ethnic groups in Banyuwangi, and different from Javanese people too. Most of the Osings stay on the fertile slopes of Ijen and Raung mountains, isolated themselves from another ethnic groups (Heru Saputra, 260:2001), in quite homogenic settlement of their villages.

Another special characteristic of Osing culture is how they see human, his origin and his place in cosmic order, with another words, a religious concept or metaphysics which includes a teaching about the purpose of mankind. Religious thoughts and expressions are quite affected by political and social tensions, as Beatty remarks (Beatty, 239:2004). Whatever the word syncretism we have to be rethought from time to time together with wider socio-cultural changes in Java which results that Islam became even and even powerful, but still have to pay attention the power of ancestors in the collective faith. In the Osing religious concept universe is the living place of different entities, not only the visible ones, but although the invisibles (*sing katon mata*). Every village has own culture-hero, a founder, who established the village through cleaning the land of village from forest, which was habited by plenty of dangerous animals and spirits. Spirits may be harmful or good ones, it depends on the situation. The village ancestor has removed them with a symbolic act as the result of his successful communication with this invisible realm. With this founding act, a consensus between human and hidden forces has born, the earlier often harmful spirit became *dahnyang* or tutelary spirit. This consensus generally give opportunity for villagers to live and work peacefully on the lands of village, but they have to respect the hidden realm of tutelary spirits, because the endeavour of human creatures to reach prosperity is effortless without the help of this forces. After his death the founder of community became a *cikal bakal* founder spirit, who reminds the villagers to respect *dahnyang* and keep the fragile equilibrium between human and other spiritual beings (Wessing, 115:2013). *Cikal bakal* although is believed to prevent bad happenings like misfortune, wretchedness and epidemic.

### ***Seblang* Bakungan: a short description**

The *Seblang* ritual of Bakungan village, Glagah subdistrict reflects the same cosmic worldview or religious concept which was explained above. *Seblang* is often mentioned as fertility rite, and is in all likelihood the oldest living performing tradition in the area (Wolbers 36:1993, Dedy Luthan, Sal Margiyanto). It occurs annual as the part of yearly village purification ceremony. The word *Seblang* both refers to this tradition and to the woman or little girl, who has to dance in trance for a number of hours during this ritual. The term *Seblang* is composed of two words, *seb* or *sep* which means silent, and *lang*, *langgeng* which means eternality. This refers to the dancer who does not speak during her trance. Dedy Luthan found that historically *Seblang* was acted in the whole territory of Blambangan, but in the contemporary Banyuwangi only elaborated in two villages, namely in Bakungan and in Olihsari. There are some differences between the *Seblang* ritual of Bakungan and Olihsari, but in this paper does not compare the two traditions.

The *Seblang* in Bakungan is an elder woman who is already after her menopause, and matri-linear is the direct descendant of an earlier *Seblang*. She plays the most important and sacred role in the rite, and her bloodline is the only guaranty that the trance may come it be, and she became really invaded. Another main actor is the *pawang* or *dhukun* who knows the way to involve the spirit into the body of *Seblang*. The *Seblang* during dance wears a *kain* (a piece of traditional textile used by both sex to wrist hip and legs), a *dodot* or *kemben* (a smaller fabric to wrist the torso used by women), different coloured scarves arranged around her hip, and has bells tied around her left ankle. The *Seblang* wears an *omproh* on her head: a wayang-style scalloped leather head-dress, ornamented with little mirrors and flowers. On the bottom of the *omproh* there are white fabric strips hanged, this kind of fabric is generally used to bundle corpses, the strips are long so they cover's the shoulders but leaves the face of *Seblang* free. She dances in the front of village pavilion, accompanied by small gamelan orchestra consisting of three *saron* (metallophone with seven bars), one *peking* (almost like *saron*, but a smaller one), one *kendhang* (drum), one *gambang* (a wooden xylophone), one *cecer* (a pair of small cymbals) and a *gong*. All of these instruments are tuned in *slendro*, and the ensemble is accomplished by a chorus of few woman singing the 17 song which are the traditional repertoire of the ceremony. We have to notice that this composition of gamelan's instrument f *Seblangin* Bakunganis not the characteristic ensemble of Banyuwangi, more likely as small ensembles of *tayub* in East-Java.

The *Seblang* rite of Bakungan occurs after Idul Adha (in the Islamic lunar calendar on the 10<sup>th</sup> day Dhu al-Hijjah) but before full-moon, the day must be Thursday or Sunday. The ceremony begins after the midday prayer, with a pilgrimage of *Seblang*, *pawang*, *pengudang* (caretaker), the village head and common villagers to the cemetery of *cikal bakal*, after it they although bring offerings to a nearby spring (*Sumber Penawar*). After sunset there is an *Ider Bumi* ceremony: the pupils of Quoran-schools leaded by the imam circle the village. They hold burning torches in their hands while they recitate *Allahuakbar*. *Ider Bumi* ends when the children arrive to the front of village pavilion, where the village elders and honourable guests already gather to pray and eat together the traditional *slametan* dish, namely cone-shaped rice-stack served with the mix of spices, grilled-seasoned chicken and grated coconut (*tumpang pecel pitik*). Meanwhile, in the one of nearby houses, *pawang*, *pengudang* prepare the *Seblang* for the ceremony. After the *Seblang* has groomed by a specialist of wedding make-up, the *pawang* put the *omproh* on the head of *Seblang*, and continuously recitates a mantra while hold an incense burner in the front of *Seblang*'s face. Finally, the *pawang* blows the smoke of incense directly to the face of *Seblang*. Suddenly the *Seblang* became stiffened, her eyes get closed, it is the sign that she entered in her trance-state. The *pawang* and *pengudang* erect and accompany her with two striped keris in her front, they walk to the place where the rite occurs, in the front of village pavilion. This space is already prepared since numeral hours before. The villagers hang various kinds of fruits, vegetables, young coconut leaves and other crops on the ceiling of village pavilion as decoration. A kind of wooden bed is situated in the middle of main road (in the front of pavilion), and the villagers set it out too richely, using sugarcane-, sugar palm- and young coconut leaves, pecaria flowers. This bed function as the chair of *Seblang* and although takes the place the plenty amount of offerings which are strictly regulated by the local custom of *Seblang* rite. Incompleteness of offerings may have very bad effect to the whole ceremony and bring the villagers into danger, so the persons who are trusted to prepare them, check everything again and again. The offering consisting the following things: a pillow, a pandan-leaf carpet, two cone shaped rice-stacks, two bunches of banana, a pair of yellow coconuts, a pair of skewer-grilled chicken, a dish from sticky rice, a clay drinking pot, a puppet, an umbrella, a bronze pot filled with water and mix of odorous flowers, two *keris*, different tools used in agricultural activities like *singkal*(plough)and *killing* (a bamboo wind propeller which is used on the paddy fields).

During two hours the *Seblang* dances accompanied by the gamelan's ensemble. There are 17 different songs used as the repertoire of *Seblang* rite of Bakungan, but not the all of them are played

consequently. The *Seblang* has the authority to choose on which song would like to dance. If she does not like the song played by gamelan, she stops dancing or became angry (she moves her head fast as someone says no), so the orchestra fast ends the song. Some of these songs actualize agricultural activities. For example, during the song of *Kembang Gadhung*, *Seblang* dig the roots of yam, eat it and soon she behaves and moves like someone who became poisoned by the toxic tubers. Another song, *Ratu Sabrang* animates the act of plough using two children as cows in the front of plough. During the song *Emping-emping* the *pengudang* continuous rotates the wind propeller named *kiling*. Other songs, like *dansa* depicts the social activity of ball from the era of Dutch colonization. In other songs, *Uga-uga*, the *Seblang* nurse a baby-like puppet in her arms and try to make it fall asleep with rhythmical moves. The ceremony finished with the *Erang-erang* song, while *Seblang* amuck with a pair of striped keris in her both hand. After it the *Seblang* became conscious with the help of *pawang*, and the villagers hotfoot caught the offerings and decorations because they believe that this gears already became supernaturally powerful and tutelary forced.

### **The Female Entity in *Seblang***

*Seblang* has often referred as fertility rite, and identified by local communities as the most sacred and powerful rite, which is able mediate between the realm of human and the invisible beings (Sutton, 136-1993). We have to emphasize that woman entity in the context of *Seblang* is connected with the nature and in the same time with the spiritual world. This is a very interesting juxtaposition, because generally the visible and invisible worlds or realms logically had to be associated with opposite entities. But in the case of *Seblang* we have to remarks that there is no opposite, actually, the opposites are dissolved. If we scrutinize the offerings of *Seblang*, will be found that there is a touch of binary opposition in the pairs of coconuts, rice-cones etc., an ancient try to imitate the order in the world through the symbolic-semiotic language of duality. Nevertheless, the female entity which incarnate in this rite, at the same time has a very deep connection with the invisible and visible realms of universe. The media between this worlds is the *Seblang* herself, but she alter to something what has more deep and rich meaning for the Osing community.

Land and paddy fields are essential for Osing people, often the value of paddy-fields or cultivable land are more precious for them compared with other forms of material welfare. A traditional Osing people is unable to live without own land, because all their needs derive from there. Because his dependence up on corps of the land Osing peoples have a huge amount knowledge about the nature and living environment. This oral knowledge is the guaranty since generations to insure the individual and collective welfare. In this agricultural context we may not deny that *Seblang* is not the only of media for the *dahnyang* or tutelary spirit, but also the manifestation of *Mbok Srintani*, the representation of food giving paddy goddess. Various versions of Sri-myths of Banyuwangi were recorded in the literature, which's essence is how this goddess in her manifestation became into useful corps among which rice is the prominent (Wessing 235-1990). The rites of rice- harvest as *slametan* and *boyong Sri* became a complex social institution which express the glad felt by human to the bless of s of God in the form of good harvest, also to the force they believe to guard the rice-fields. The names Sri, Dewi Sri, Nini Towok, Nini Thowong, Nyi Pohaci, Mbok Srintani refer the same substancy, symbol or manisfestation of paddy and fertility (Efendi-Anoegrajekti, 8:2004). Conclusely, most of the Osings still believe that Sri and the tutelary spirit (*dahnyang*) or the spirit of *cikal-bakal* are the invisible entities who guard the rice-fields and other cultivable lands.

On the other hand, *Seblang* is the one most important root of *gandrung*, an erotic social dance which became the representation of Osing identity and the emblem of Banyuwangi. Gandrung is often paralleled with *tayub*, *lengger*, *sintren*, genres of erotic dances of rural communities on the countryside of the island. *Tayub*, *lengger* and *sintren* originally occur after the rice-harvest, but in

time became the popular entertainment of wedding ceremonies and other private occurrences. In these dances, the same as *gandrung*, male guests pay to the dancer to be allowed dance together as an act of manliness. Dancers of *tayub*, *lengger*, *sintren*, *gandrung* are not again themselves, they alter to the ultimate representation of female entity, same as a diva, a goddess or a heavenly *widodari*. Make connection with them, as dancing, chatting, flirting with these beautiful beings is a symbolic act which may appreciate the male guests as prestigious social beings. In this context we may not deny the associations between sexual and agricultural fertility. The referenes to reproduction and fertility may symbolize the continuity of nature. Moreover, women are often seen as being domestic, pious, pure, gentle, simple and kind. These characters are different from men, but similar to the characteristic of nature. But we have to remark that *Seblang* and *gandrung* originally were young men who dressed and behaved as woman. In the history of Bakungan, the first and third *Seblang* was actually men, and they were usual villagers with wife and children, but during the rite have the considerable licence to behave unusual. The reason in the background is the concept of sacred. Sacred In this conception the males are bound to the everyday world, and the female comes from, or bring to her, the spirit world. The spirit realm of female is also associated with the realm of the dead, of the ancestors. This is more conspicuous if we see that the *Seblang* of Bakungan is an elder woman who is already not fertile (after her menopause). Her physical appearance is also often commented by villagers like something threatening, like a living corpse. The fact that *Seblang* is an elder woman, one of them is forgotten because her skin changed unbelievable white and she wears the *omproh* with white stripes from the fabric is used to bundle corps. She alters to something from the other side where nobody can enter, but with the help of pawing some forces of that realm can present in physical body of her. Through her infertility, *Seblang* becomes unsexual or more exactly, her sex is not important again. But in her appearance, she still looks like a woman, and we know, that the player of *Seblang* is a woman who already have children and grandchildren, but is not able again to give life. The fact that the role of *Seblang* in Bakungan were often took by males suggests that there is a concept of combining sexual opposites like as we see in the *ardhanari* image of the Hindu mythology (Anderson, 14:1972). Not only *Seblang*, but also one of the *pengudangs* (takecarer) and the group of *panjak* (gamelan's player) are also female in *Seblang*. It shows that woman has a special role in this ritual, not only as the manifestation of tutelary spirits and *Mbok Srindani*, but as the preserver of local wisdom kept by the songs played in the ritual. As it was explained above, the 17 songs performed in *Seblangin* Bakungan have various theme, sometimes they refer the names of plants and geographical places, other songs are hidden critic about the sufferings of the colonial era, others depict agricultural activity as fishing, bringing food to the rice field-workers, other invoke Sri Tanjung or a *widodari*, a few of them are historical memories of Osing community. On the whole, there is a very complex presence of female entity in the *Seblang* ritual. This presence suggests deep meanings for the Osing community, related to fertility, nature and hidden realms of supranatural forces.

### **The Case of Female Gamelan's Players of *Seblang***

Culture is changing as Hall says, and this is absolutely current for *Seblang* in Bakungan (Hall, 23-1990). In the two last decades the wind of changes touched this small village, especially because Bakungan is situated on the northwest suburbs of the city of Banyuwangi. Bakungan altered from traditional rural village to suburbs, where different groups of new inhabitants found place to live. With the fast rhythm of development of home estates, many villagers sold a part or the whole of their lands for good value price. This means a big change in the local identity. As previously was explained, traditional Osing people cannot imagine life without own cultivable land. In Bakungan, the children of farmers became modern suburbers, they survive are already not depend from the land and corps. They either sell their fathers land to get money and use it to launch out an enterprise. This

cultural-, social- and ecological changes influence the myths and beliefs about the ritual. The village, that once was the community of ethnically-culturally-socially relative homogeneous Osing farmers, nowadays is a living complex of heterogeneous social elements. The ritual that once mirrored a local worldview about nature and cosmic order, nowadays has different meanings for the community. This change was accelerated by the growth in support of digital technologies used by Osing communities, and the commodification of ritual as the part of Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival in harmony of the development tendencies. Finally, the ecological changes (decreasing of cultivable lands in the village), cultural changes (the mixing of original inhabitants of Bakungan with new villagers with different social-, ethnical- and cultural background) and changes in life style makes the original concept of *Seblang* rite not again relevant for the villagers. They fill it with new meanings. We found that the inhabitants of Bakungan, also the new ones believe that *Seblang* is sacral, but the essence of original worldview of the concept in the background of rite became cropped or not reachable for them. Main markers of this change are how the political tendencies of interest even more and more influence the implementation of the rite.

One of the changes in the implementation was that the female gamelan's players were arbitrary changed to male ones. That happened in 2013, dictated by the actual village head. The village head, two months before the yearly ritual, simply changed the troupe with a male one, although from the skilled members of the community. The main reason was, that the preparation of woman gamelan's players needs more costs, and time. On the day of the *Seblang* ritual, women are busy to cook the dishes served in *slametan*. The men of Bakungan have the opinion that it is difficult to the female gamelan's players to unite their duty as house wives with the duty as gamelan's player in the performance of *Seblang* ritual. The costs of their make-up and costume were high too, because they use the traditional Central-Javanese outfit which uses *kondhe* so they have to pay someone for the make-up and hair-do. Meanwhile the source of costs of *Seblang* were covered by the voluntary donation of villagers, often not enough for the needs of ritual. Since 2008 the areal tourism office of Banyuwangi district also support the event of *Seblang* Bakungan, but this help is rather felt in the promotion of the event through put it in to the yearly calendar of Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival. So, the community often have material difficulties. Consequently, they endeavour to make cost reductions. The female gamelan's players fall a victims of circumstances because of the patriarchal hegemony of the village itself, where man is still the more powerful player in the cultural system of custom. From the other hand, without they realize their identity as Osing women, they conform themselves and their physical outfit also according to the interest of earlier dominant political hegemony using a construction of Javanese image, as called Mataram hegemony. The theme of opposite between the Osing heroism and Javanese rulers has historical roots in the Minakjingga-story. Later, in the era of Dutch colonisation, in the Osing perspective the Javanese Mataram Kingdom rulers became the symbol of political opportunism, NB. they got their power and kept their palaces survive, because they make agreement according to the Dutch interest of building alliance of power to prevents rebellion or other forms of resistance. This opposition between the heroism of Osings and opportunism of Mataram eclipse under the regime of New Order. The construction of Javanese depicts humble characterism (*alus*), politeness in etiquette (*sopan*) and sophisticated culture (*adiluhung*) became a gear in politic to declare Javanese ethnic group as the legal apparent of quondam Hindu kingdoms, and based on this historical reasoning, to declare Javanese as the ideal leader of Indonesia. This construction causes that Osing women, like the gamelan's players of Bakungan, reverse their traditional costume with the Javanese one. Because in that era they felt, to wear the javanese *sanggul* and kebaya from lace is culturally more prestigious than the traditional Osing wearing.

We have to notice that the female gamelan's players of Bakungan are mostly old women with natural (not academical) skill in gamelan. Most of them are socially underprivileged: descendants of poor villagers, without any kind of formal education. They earn additional money for their family as

masseur, agriculturer labourer, food stall assistants etc. As underprivileged women, their position in the social system of village is quite powerless and marginal. After the entrance of government as patron of the event through the regional tourism office, *Seblang* became the conflict point between different group of various interests. This disputation makes the distance between centre and periferic even and even further. It effects a rupture in the interpretation of ritual: the local inhabitants of Bakungan, mostly the elder generations still believe that *Seblang* is sacred, and the villagers have to keep it pure from not religious interests. Meanwhile public figures of Bakungan whose are more experienced in outside social life, and the outsiders support the regional leader government target , n.b. achieve Banyuwangi as favourite tourism destination, see *Seblang* as a potential vehicle to make Bakungan famous, to alter it an tourism village, get more income through the ritual etc. The more outsiders of different interests step in to the space of *Seblang* the more the female gamelan's players get marginalised, without the possibility of articulate their wishes to participate in the rituals as musician. We have to emphasise that it was a big disadvantage for the female gamelan's players, because they cannot continue their musical-artistic activity in any other form. They retire permanently their activities as gamelan's players.

After five years of their banishment, 2018 Bakungan female gamelan's players got possibility to participate again as musician in the *Seblang* rite. It was possible with a donation from CME (Cipta Media Ekspresi) in the frame of project "Revitalisasi panjak putri *Seblang* Bakungan". This project assure the costs of their needs as consumption of regular rehearsals, costum, make-up, properties of performance, fee of the gamelan's teacher etc. The first step in thgis revitalisation progress was that they wer able to articalet their need to participate in the rite. After their affair was took up by the volunteers from AMAN Bakungan (Aliensi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara), the female gamelan's players became optimistic and even ambitious to play gamelan in *Seblang* again. They also were able to articulate that they want to wear traditional female costume of Osings, as kebaya from black cotton fabric, *sawet* (a piece of batic fabric to wrap the hip and legs) with characteristic local pattern, and *semir* (a same patterned syal). They also reject to wear *sanggul*, not only because that hair-do is difficult to make and needs to paay a specialist to done, but also they say: "we just bun our own hair as Osing women do". In parallel with the emerging Using identity of Banyuwangi of last ten years, they finally found their own cultural identity and became confident to show it as physically for the world.

## Conclusions

We found three different stages in implementation of the *Seblang* ritual by the villagers. In the first stage the villagers keep the custom as their sacred heritage even when they do not understand all the aspect of the concept in the background of it. The always severaly avoid to alter something in the rder elaboration because they believe that it would the dangerous for te work community it enter to the second stage in parallel with the preogress of regional goverment became aware of the importance of Osing identity as vehicle in the development based on tourism. In this stages *Seblang* became the conflict point of defference groups of interest and it often occured changes in the implementation fof right. This stage shows a growing tendency of the forces of political hegemony which one to control the community and the rite in accordance with the target. At this stages we have to remark rupture between the grup of interest of centre and periferic. It happen because most of the modification were made with the tendency of up to bottom. In the third stages a new perspective and awareness of identity was born among the community the aware that they had to preserve the tradition and its adherent social institution from the intervention of outsiders. In this third stage we see a consolidation between the members of community as the sign of resisance to face the outer intervention. In this stage the all of the effort to preserve the originality of the rite has bottom to up characteristic

The revitalisation of female galeman's payers progress in harmony with the merging of third stages this situation was mature for revitalisation of the previously banish it happen with naturally and in harmony of the emerging identity and self-awareness of the Bakungan community as result they are more capable to keep themselves and their traditions from outer intervention.

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