

From Hobby to Global Tradition: The Early History of the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival and the Role of Kretek District (2004-2006)

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Abstrak

Tradisi balon udara di Wonosobo telah berkembang dari hiburan lokal menjadi festival pariwisata budaya kelas dunia, namun peran sentral Kecamatan Kretek sebagai pionir dan penjaga tradisi ini belum banyak terungkap. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis sejarah Kretek dalam pengembangan festival balon udara Wonosobo, mendeskripsikan evolusi praktik menerbangkan balon dari masa ke masa, serta mendokumentasikan individu dan komunitas pelestari tradisi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian sejarah, terdiri dari heuristik, kritik Sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi, meskipun umumnya metode ini mengandalkan arsip dan dokumen tertulis, penelitian ini mendapatkan informasi penting dari hasil wawancara mendalam dengan para penerbang balon di era tahun 1990-an hingga 2008-an. Hasil Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa Kretek memiliki akar kuat sejak era Belanda, terinspirasi pendaratan balon tahun 1915, dengan Atmo Goper sebagai pelopor. Tradisi ini berevolusi signifikan dalam bahan, desain (berkat Pak Kasuri dan “bandulan”), serta teknik pengapian (transisi ke batok kelapa). Komunitas informal di Kretek melestarikan keahlian turun-temurun melalui kolaborasi. Puncaknya, Festival Balon Wonosobo 2005-2006 resmi diselenggarakan, meraih dua penghargaan MURI pada 2006, mengukuhkan pengakuan nasional atas warisan budaya Kretek ini.

Kata kunci: festival balon udara, tradisional, kretek wonosobo.

Abstract

The hot air balloon tradition in Wonosobo has evolved from a local pastime to a world-class cultural tourism festival, yet the Kretek District's central role as a pioneer and guardian of this tradition remains largely unknown. This study aims to identify and analyze the history of Kretek in the development of the Wonosobo hot air balloon festival, describe the evolution of balloon flying practices over time, and document the individuals and communities who preserve the tradition. This study uses historical research methods. Although these methods generally rely on archives and written documents, this study gained important information from in-depth interviews with balloon flyers from the 1990s to 2008. These interviews not only serve as a complement to archival data but also serve as a primary source for understanding experiences, motivations, challenges, and innovations not formally recorded. The research reveals that Kretek has deep roots dating back to the Dutch era, inspired by the 1915 balloon landing, with Atmo Goper as a pioneer. This tradition has evolved significantly in materials, design (thanks to Mr. Kasuri and the “pendulum”), and ignition technique (the transition to coconut shells). Informal communities in Kretek preserve hereditary skills through collaboration. At its peak, the 2005-2006 Wonosobo Balloon Festival was officially held, winning two MURI awards in 2006, confirming national recognition of this Kretek cultural heritage.

Keywords: balloon festival, traditional, kretek wonosobo.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a nation rich in cultural diversity and traditions, as reflected in the various expressions of its local

communities. Amidst the currents of globalization, the preservation of traditional culture presents both a challenge and an opportunity to showcase

a region's unique identity. One cultural manifestation that has successfully maintained its existence while attracting international attention is the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival.

This festival is more than just a celebration; it's a reflection of the rich local culture that has successfully captured global attention. In 2025, the event will be held again as part of the 200th anniversary of Wonosobo Regency, with the main venue at Kalianget Recreation Park (Prasetya, 2025). A total of 36 hot air balloons were tethered and flown in iconic formations, displaying visuals such as Mount Sindoro and Telaga Menjer. By organizing the event with a strong focus on aesthetics and safety, the festival serves as an effective medium for preserving tradition through the use of distinctive local motifs (Apriliano & Ihsanudin, 2025).

Furthermore, the strength of the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival lies in its ability to integrate elements of traditional culture and modern innovation. In addition to the balloon display, the event features various local arts such as Topeng Lengger and Angklung Tek Tek, and also presents a bazaar of MSME products and educational sessions from the hot air balloon community (Sulistiono, 2025). The official recognition of the festival's cultural value was reinforced by the acquisition of an Intellectual Property certificate from the Ministry of Law and

Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia (bob.kemenparekraf, 2025)

The participation of international guests also strengthens the festival's position as a global cultural event. The presence of representatives from Brazil and Colombia shows that the festival has successfully reached a foreign audience. Not only that, but the participation of communities from other regions like Magelang and Yogyakarta also demonstrates that the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival is a space for interregional collaboration, strengthening national cultural networks (Pradikta, 2025)

The growth of technology and digital media has been a key factor in expanding the festival's reach internationally. Thousands of photos and videos capturing the balloons adorning the Wonosobo sky have gone viral across various social media platforms. Hashtags like #BalonWonosobo have created a captivating new visual identity, even inspiring the public to dub the region "Indonesia's Cappadocia." Through the power of digital media and global engagement, the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival is now more than just a local cultural heritage; it has become a symbol of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy on the world stage (Suyitno, 2024).

The development of this tradition, which is now packaged as a modern festival, has long and deep historical roots

among the people of Wonosobo. However, behind the current festive atmosphere and popularity of the festival, the central role of several pioneering regions that have preserved this tradition is often overlooked. In this context, Kretek Subdistrict emerges as the main focus of this research. Kretek is not just one of the regions in Wonosobo; it is the primary center and the origin of the traditional hot air balloon tradition.

The involvement of Kretek residents in this tradition deserves special attention and in-depth study. Since ancient times, Kretek has been known as an area where the expertise in designing, making, and flying hot air balloons has been passed down from generation to generation. The spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and togetherness in preserving this tradition has given Kretek a very important position in the overall narrative of the Wonosobo hot air balloon festival.

Although the festival has now expanded and been adapted in various other subdistricts, the rich historical footprint and Kretek's contribution to shaping the identity and characteristics of the Wonosobo hot air balloon festival have not been fully revealed or well-documented. This issue drives the urgency of this research to delve deeper into the historical and contemporary role of Kretek Subdistrict in maintaining the preservation of this iconic tradition.

Previous studies have examined the hot air balloon phenomenon from various perspectives, providing an important context for this study. For instance, research (A. U. Utami & Suswulandari, 2022) For instance, research highlighting the hot air balloon tradition in Bringin village, Ponorogo, provides an overview of similar practices in other regions. From a legal perspective, (Sundoro & Hananto, 2020) specifically analyzed the legal sanctions against illegal hot air balloon flights in Wonosobo. Additionally, (Pambudi & Fardiani, 2022) discussed the sociological conflict resolution that emerged around the hot air balloon tradition, indicating tension between cultural preservers and public interest. The aspect of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) in the implementation of cultural festivals involving hot air balloons was also researched by (F. G. N. Utami, 2022) in the context of the Sindoro Sumbing festival, which is relevant for understanding the social dimension of this tradition.

Despite these studies providing a valuable theoretical and contextual foundation for the hot air balloon tradition in general, there has been no in-depth research specifically focusing on the historical role of Kretek Subdistrict in shaping and preserving this tradition over time. This research aims to fill that gap, providing a more complete narrative on the contributions of Kretek Subdistrict.

Considering the background provided about the hot air balloon tradition in Wonosobo and the active involvement of Kretek residents in its preservation, this research seeks to answer several main questions: 1) What was the role of Kretek Subdistrict in shaping the early history of the Wonosobo hot air balloon festival? 2) How has the tradition of flying balloons in Kretek Subdistrict developed over time? 3) Who are the key individuals and communities in Kretek Subdistrict who are actively preserving the tradition of flying hot air balloons?

This research has several primary objectives to achieve: 1) To identify and analyze in depth the historical role of Kretek Subdistrict in the development of the Wonosobo hot air balloon tradition and festival. 2) To describe in detail the evolution and development of the practice of flying hot air balloons in Kretek Subdistrict, including its adaptation to various challenges. 3) To identify and document the profiles of key individuals and the community structures that play an active role in preserving the hot air balloon tradition in Kretek Subdistrict.

METHODS

This research uses the historical method as put forth by (Wijayati, 2009). It begins with the heuristic stage, which involves the collection of data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was

obtained through in-depth interviews with several community figures in Kretek Subdistrict, including hereditary balloon makers, annual festival organizers, and village officials with direct involvement in the regulation and implementation of the event. Furthermore, this research is supported by documentary materials such as photo archives, contemporary newspapers, and other relevant written documents (Gottschalk, 1969).

Primary documents were sourced from various institutions, including the Wonosobo Regency Archives and Library, the Suara Merdeka Archives Depot, and the SIDAK website of the National Press Monument. Secondary sources include supporting literature such as books, theses, and articles related to the research topic.

The second stage of the historical method is source criticism, which encompasses the process of testing and verifying the validity and credibility of the sources obtained. External criticism was conducted to assess the origin, physical form, and authenticity of the documents, including photo archives, newspapers, and other written documents used in the research. Meanwhile, internal criticism aimed to test the content of these sources, such as the consistency of information, the context of statements, and their relevance to the research topic. This critical process was carried out systematically through data triangulation,

by comparing interview results with written data from official institutions to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the information used (Kuntowijoyo, 2018).

The third stage of the historical method is interpretation, which is the process of elaborating and interpreting historical facts that have undergone source criticism. At this stage, the researcher does not simply arrange facts chronologically but also endeavors to uncover the meaning behind the cultural practice of hot air balloons as a local heritage of the Kretek Subdistrict community. The interpretation is carried out through ethnographic and anthropological approaches, referencing the concept of “local knowledge” from (Geertz, 1983) which emphasizes the importance of understanding knowledge that grows from the local experience of the community, as well as the thoughts of (Koentjaraningrat, 2002) on culture as a system that is learned and socially inherited. The final stage of the historical research method is to reconstruct the existing facts by presenting them in a chronological narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Geographical and Socio-Cultural Aspects in Kretek, Wonosobo

Kretek Subdistrict, located in the southern part of Wonosobo Regency, Central Java, has distinctive geographical and socio-cultural characteristics that form a

landscape supporting local traditions like hot air balloon flying. Geographically, the area is dominated by highland and hilly topography, part of the Central Javan mountain range, situated at an altitude of 755 to 1354 meters above sea level. This elevation results in a cool, often cold, climate throughout the year with relatively high rainfall, conditions that are optimal for the fertile volcanic soil in the region. Consequently, agriculture serves as the backbone of the local economy, with various commodities such as vegetables, fruits, and tobacco being the main source of livelihood for most residents (BPS, 2024).

From a socio-cultural perspective, the people of Kretek highly uphold traditional values that are still strongly ingrained in their daily lives. The majority of the population are devout Muslims, making the langgar or musala (small prayer houses) inseparable centers for both religious and social community activities. The celebration of Eid al-Fitr, for example, is not only a sacred religious moment but also a central and festive event for togetherness and strengthening social ties, where the hot air balloon tradition plays a significant role as a marker of the celebration. The value of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) is very strong in Kretek (F. G. N. Utami, 2022).

Early Tradition of Wonosobo's Traditional Hot Air Balloons

Long before the Wonosobo Hot Air Balloon Festival became an official, organized event, the tradition of flying balloons in Kretek Subdistrict was already deeply rooted in the community.



Figure 1. Javanen, Vermoedelijk bij de afvaart van een luchtballon op java (1915) Source: KITLV, Leiden (collection code 107499).

This practice originated during the Dutch colonial era, when the community flew hot air balloons to enliven the Eid al-Fitr (Lebaran) celebration. Its main purpose was purely for entertainment and to mark the occasion, serving as a moment for gathering and socializing.

Based on oral accounts, the primary inspiration for this tradition came from a passenger balloon landing in Wonosobo Square around 1915. This landing was presumably for the purpose of aerial photography. This assumption is strengthened by historical context, as aerial photo documentation of the Wonosobo area from the early 20th century exists, such as photos of Hotel *Herstellig* “Dieng” and the Tambi tea

plantation (1937) (Wuryanto & Wasonoputro, 2021).

The use of a hot air balloon as a photography platform during that era was a logical choice, considering that the technology at the time had limited shutter speed. A stable, slow-moving vehicle like a hot air balloon was therefore more effective for photography than a high-speed aircraft.



Figure 2. Tambi Tea Plantation. Source: Facebook Wonosobo Tempoe Doelo.

This event inspired Atmo Goper (1898-1978), a creative figure from Krakal Tamanan Hamlet, Karangluhur Village, Kretek Subdistrict, to become a pioneer in making traditional hot air balloons. He was known as a hairdresser, a birdcage and lantern craftsman, and a rebana music artist. Atmo Goper subsequently became an expert in pioneering and developing this tradition within his community (Wuryanto & Wasonoputro, 2021).

In the early days, the balloon-making technique was very simple yet required precision. The balloons were made using *kertas kripik* or *kertas pilus*, a

type of paper used to wrap traditional sweets like wajik and dodol, which at the time was only available in green, red, white, and yellow. This paper was then combined with umbrella paper. Although the color options were limited, the quality of the paper from that era was believed to be superior.



Figure 3. Balloon belonging to the people of Watugleto, Sindupaten, Kretek. Source: Personal Document.

The procurement of this paper was often difficult and required a pre-order system that could take up to six months, as supplies were brought in from Jakarta and Semarang. Funding for raw materials was generally covered by contributions from villagers, which were collected periodically, particularly on the Kliwon market day in the weeks leading up to Ramadan. For adhesive, the community produced their own glue from cassava starch. Once the raw materials were collected, the balloons were made together as a communal effort.

The balloon flights were conducted on the second day after Eid al-Fitr, typically between 5:30 and 7:00 AM when the wind was still calm, in the yard of the langgar or musala in Krakal Tamanan Hamlet. Wind estimation was carefully considered for the success of the flight, and the process was accompanied by the sound of beduk (mosque drum) being played by children. The size of the balloons was not as large as it is today, with an average height of 7 meters and a shape that was not perfectly round, having angled tops. Simplicity in motif and design was a hallmark of the balloons from that era.

Strategies and Innovations in Balloon Making

The transformation of traditional hot air balloon-making strategies by the community of Kretek Subdistrict is inseparable from the social, economic, and cultural dynamics that have taken place since the 1960s. During this period, access to raw materials like paper improved through trade routes from major cities to rural areas, including Wonosobo. This phenomenon occurred alongside an increase in social mobility and the strengthening of the village self-help spirit (swadaya desa) as part of national development programs. (Sangsongko, 2021)

In facing the limitations of raw materials like glue, the community showed creativity by processing cassava

starch into an alternative adhesive, reflecting their independent utilization of local resources. On the other hand, the evolution of hot air balloon designs from conventional to more complex and aesthetic forms reflects a shift in cultural orientation, where balloons are seen not only as instruments of celebration but also as symbols of a shared identity and social status within the community.

Early balloons tended to be simple, but with development, their shape evolved to be more rounded, resembling an inverted light bulb. This change was due to the contribution of Pak Kasuri, who specifically designed the shape and pattern to ensure optimal and stable flight. Additionally, Pak Kasuri innovated by creating the *Bandulan*, or ballast system. Early experiments used a 0.5-kilogram orange as a weight, aiming to balance the balloon. This was crucial, as the bottom of the balloon was often filled with firecrackers and parachutes, sometimes weighing up to 2 kilograms, or even food and drinks. The *Bandulan* system allowed the balloon to fall back to the ground in a controlled manner once the lower ballast was released.

Overall, the Kretek community has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and innovate, transforming a simple tradition into a more sophisticated practice through changes in materials, design, and firing techniques. The biggest technical challenge they faced was the shrinkage of

smoke inside the balloon, which caused imbalance and the risk of fire. To overcome this, the community adapted their firing techniques.

Initially, this firing technique used a combination of *oman* (dry twigs) and *dry damen* (rice stalks), with *wet damen* added for thick smoke. In the 1980s, firewood began to be used. However, the most significant innovation occurred in 2004/2005 with the transition to using coconut shells as fuel, an initiative started by a group of youths from *Kedewan Hamlet*, Kretek Subdistrict, at the festival during that time. Coconut shells proved capable of producing stronger heat and lift, as well as clearer smoke, which helped preserve the aesthetic appearance of the balloons.

The Community of Balloon Makers in Kretek Subdistrict

The hot air balloon tradition in the Kretek region is more than just a hobby; it has fostered the formation of a solid and dynamic group of balloon makers. The structure of these groups is often informal, frequently based on family, neighborhood units (RT/RW), or natural hobby groups that emerged in various hamlets. Although there was no single formal organization overseeing all the balloon makers in the early stages, familial and regional ties became the primary foundation for their collaboration.

The process of member regeneration and the transfer of skills is a critical aspect of ensuring the continuity of this tradition. The expertise in making balloons is generally passed down from generation to generation, from parents to children or from elders to the younger members of the community.



Figure 4. Balloon created by children from Mulyasari, Kretek Sub-district. Source: Personal document of Purwo Setyadi.

Children and teenagers are often involved in every stage of balloon making, from collecting contributions to cutting paper, and assisting with the gluing and flight preparation process. This direct involvement serves as an effective practical learning method, ensuring that techniques and innovations continue to be mastered by the next generation.

The internal dynamics of the balloon-making groups in Kretek show a

blend of close collaboration and, at times, potential for conflict. Generally, the spirit of collaboration is very high, especially as Eid al-Fitr approaches. The process of collecting funds through regular community contributions (iuran) demonstrates their solidarity in procuring raw materials. However, conflicts can arise, such as a past dispute over the ownership of a balloon that landed in another village. This disagreement often led to a struggle for the balloon, as the finders felt entitled to it. Fortunately, this problem was resolved in 1984 thanks to the initiative of Drs. Muh Ridwan, the head of the Gerakan Pemuda Ansor of Kretek Subdistrict, who spearheaded a collective agreement to regulate balloon ownership and responsibility.

Development of the Balloon Festival (2004-2006)

The hot air balloon festival in Wonosobo underwent a significant development between 2004 and 2006, transforming from a mere Eid al-Fitr tradition into an officially organized festival. Before 2005, hot air balloon flights in Wonosobo were more of a local tradition to enliven the Eid al-Fitr celebration, and while some balloon competitions existed, they were not large-scale. The clear transition toward a more organized festival format began in 2005.



Figure 5. 2005 Balloon Festival at Wonosobo Square. Source: Facebook Wonosobo Tempoe Doelo.

This was the year the decades-old tradition was fully packaged into a more festive and organized event. This transformation was pioneered by Daun Organizer, a creative community initiated by students of Universitas Sains Al-Quran (UNSIQ) Wonosobo who were deeply committed to preserving local culture and empowering the community. They were not only event organizers but also agents of social change who sought to elevate the tradition into a tool for regional development (Purnomo, 2011) They later collaborated with the local government.

During this festival, the judging process faced significant obstacles due to the limited number of judges compared to the number of balloons competing, with more than 20 balloons flown legally at the time. Pak Agus, one of the judges, provided crucial input to the committee to increase the number of judges for the next festival. This was important given the many aspects that had to be evaluated, including shape, design, team cohesion,

and the challenge of judging balloons flown simultaneously.

The peak of this development occurred in 2006, when the Wonosobo Balloon Festival received two prestigious awards from the Indonesian World Records Museum (MURI). The first award (record number 0216) was for the largest traditional balloon, which reached a height of 19 meters, a diameter of 11 meters, and a circumference of 36 meters.



Figure 6. 2006 Balloon Festival. Source: Arpusda Wonosobo.

The giant balloon was flown to commemorate the 181st anniversary of Wonosobo Regency. The second award was given for the category of the most traditional balloons. This extraordinary success not only attracted the attention of tens of thousands of tourists and photographers but also marked the national recognition of Wonosobo's rich cultural tradition.

CONCLUSION

Balloon Festival Wonosobo represents the local community's success in preserving, developing, and transforming tradition

into a form that is aesthetically and socially relevant in the contemporary era. The festival's increasingly structured and international-scale organization is a testament to the roles of community support, institutional backing, and the use of digital technology in expanding the reach of local culture. In this context, the festival is not merely a visual celebration but also an instrument of Indonesian cultural diplomacy that strengthens regional identity on the global stage.

The Kretek subdistrict has played a central historical role in shaping the Wonosobo balloon tradition since the early 20th century. This tradition has evolved through the intergenerational transfer of local knowledge, continuous technical innovation, and social dynamics involving various community groups. Figures such as Atmo Goper and Pak Kasuri are important representations of the Kretek community's creativity and dedication to preserving this cultural heritage. Furthermore, the involvement of children and the younger generation in the process of making and flying balloons demonstrates that this tradition lives on as a collective practice and a form of informal, intergenerational education.

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