

Local complex:

Projects of modernity, complicated cultural appropriations,
and fluid-hybrid subjectivity in a local sphere

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Introduction

In one foggy evening at 5 August 2009, I had a talk with Handi, a 27 years old Tenggerese young man in Desa Ngadisari, Probolinggo. When I asked about his activities, he answered as follow.

‘Time for planting vegetables means time for my mates and me to go to *tegal* [farm], because from the works in *tegal* we can get money. When a harvest comes, my parents give me money to buy some new clothes in Sukapura or Probolinggo. I also often buy new clothes before *Hari Raya Karo* [as *Idul Fitri* in Muslim’s tradition] because there are many neighbours who will come to my home and I must come to their home too, so it is important for me to have a good looking by wearing the new clothes. Although we are accustomed to modern cultures, as buying and wearing up to date fashion, listening to popular music, and accessing internet, we here are tied to Tenggerese tradition. We need to be active in communal rituals. We cannot drink beer in public places. We cannot play gamble. We also cannot have free sex. However, I had viewed Ariel Peterpan’s porn video, with Luna Maya and also with Cut Tari. Ha...ha...ha, I have them in my cellular telephone.’

All Handi’s statements are discourses indicating, following Bhabha [1994], *cultural in-betweenness* and *hybridity* experienced by Tenggerese people as local subjects in responding the coming of modern cultures, particularly consumption practice and profane narratives of media. Indeed, being modern in local sphere has become regime of truth and has made the local subjects identifying themselves with metropolitan life styles, although not completely. However, because of institutionalization of traditional cultures since their childhood, the local people are still practicing some important rituals communally, obeying some traditional taboos, and believing supernatural power. Bhabha calls such cultural condition as *vernacular cosmopolitanism* in which the local subjects desire modern progress of life without individualism [Bhabha & Commarof, 2002]. Although postcolonial perspective considers the local subjects have fluid strategy in articulating modernity and negotiating some of their traditional wisdom, the problem is not quite simple.

Indeed, the local people have been appropriating education, daily consumption and capitalism, democratization, and secularization as the forms of modernity projects that have been changing some traditional cultures, but they still have been preserving some other cultures as signifiers of essential identity. Those processes may emerge what I call as *local complex*, a complicated process of cultural appropriation in local sphere coloured by fluid-hybrid subjectivity. In this article, by applying postcolonial perspective without leaving political economy consideration, I will read field data from Tenggerese community in Probolinggo, East Java to discuss some cultural conditions in local complex in the following frameworks. Firstly, the local people appropriate modernity into their everyday life, but they still believe, celebrate, and preserve some traditional cultures essentially. Secondly, as the discursive effect of modern experiences, there are some changing in understanding traditional beliefs and practices as [a] celebrating rituals in more profane and luxurious ways and [b] having deconstructive meaning towards religious authority and ancient taboos. As concluding remarks, I will emphasize some strategic researches on local communities and give new considerations of postcolonial studies and.

Being modern in local sphere

Indeed, modernity has been the most powerful ideological knowledge and movement in the human civilization that has changed and transformed the whole planet [Venn, 2000]. Although historically modernity has been a part of colonialism [Gillen & Ghosh, 2007], its discursive formation as the enlightening and civilizing knowledge of human beings circulated in education, politics, and economy has re-configured socio-cultural patterns in postcolonial societies. In Indonesian context, the New Order regime under Soeharto authority with national development policy opened the gate for the coming of modernity projects massively through industrialization in cities, green revolution in villages, education in all levels, and media campaigns. Today, in the Reformation era, when the state regime adopts market political economy and media corporations—particularly television—represents more massive metropolitan stories, the local subjects can be easier for accessing and mimicking metropolitan cultural forms in their daily life. What I want to re-read then is a *bullet* paradigm in constructing the influence of projects of modernity towards the local people and their traditional cultures. In this paradigm, the state-sponsored-programs and media narratives position a superior role in determining all cultural moves in local

communities. However, the projects will find rocky roads when the local people do not agree with or resist against them as showed by *Baduy Dalam* community. For me, it means that there can be internal factor which supports the acceptance of modern cultures in local communities.

In Tenggerese community there is a traditional wisdom called as *setya laksana*. It is a commitment to accomplish five ideal concepts of life [*walima*], namely enough for food [*wareg*], healthy life [*waras*], clothing [*wastra*], knowledge [*wasis*], and home [*wisma*]. This *setya laksana* principally encourages Tenggerese people to have hard workings. In the ancient times, they might accomplish it in subsistent ways. For having enough food, for example, they could plant 9 months-aged-white-corn as their major meal. For home buildings, they could use wood materials that would protect them from the very cool temperature. However, the coming of agrarian capitalism—firstly introduced by the colonial regime and continued massively under New Order regime [Hefner, 1999]—with its vegetables farming project have given Tenggerese people financial beneficiary that have changed the traditional commitment into city-oriented-ideals. Financial accumulation from vegetables transaction and tourism activities has made them consuming rice from the lower regions, wearing popular clothes, going to doctors when got sick, and building brick houses with city-looks-designs. In addition, Japanese car and motorcycle, television, gas stove, and refrigerator have become “new family members”. Education project by the state have introduced Tenggerese people to the importance of reason for human civilization.

Today, those cultural conditions become the dominant colour of Tenggerese community's and other local communities' daily life, particularly in the context of material accomplishment. Under market capitalism as they maintain in agrarian and tourism works, economic prosperity becomes hegemonic ideology in local sphere and makes the local people leaving subsistent mode of life. Subsequently, consuming industrial wares is ordinary practice that blurs cultural distinction between the rural and the metropolitan people. In addition, the intensive-huge representations of *metropolitan narratives* in media programs, particularly television with attractive signification, and education curriculum make modernity as the ordinate of continuous transformation and changing of traditional cultures that emerge a new local subjectivity. Once again, modernity—both as ideology and material practice—can be hegemonic in local sphere because some traditional teachings about earthly happiness encourage the local people to reach ideal-modern goals in their life.

The politics of being [not completely] modern and its complicated process

In talking about modern education of Tenggerese children, teenagers, and youths that may detach them from traditional cultures, Sutomo, a *dhukun pandita*—a religious leader—in Desa Ngadisari, Probolinggo, says:

‘They still believe and commit to Tenggerese tradition. Although being accustomed with city cultures, they do not bring them here. They still involve in sacred rituals, *Kasada*, *Entas-entas*, etc. If you have research in Tenggerese communities in Malang, Pasuruan, and Lumajang regency, you will find the same condition. Why? Since their childhood, their parents have taught traditional rituals and wisdom. Dhukun also always give them advices after praying at *pura desa* about our traditions and their importance for our life here. Further, for students of elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools in Tenggerese territory, there is local curriculum on Tenggerese cultures. These familial process, religious meetings, and local content curriculum have made them afraid leaving our tradition because they will get *walat*, a disastrous supernatural sanction when somebody leaving tradition and taboo.’ [Interview, 29 July 2009]

In the new local subjectivity, besides the changing of traditional wisdom into modern pathway, the local people still negotiate some ancestor’s cultures under preservation paradigm. In Tenggerese case, the main target for this preservation process is children, teenagers, and youths because they will determine the future of Tenggerese community. For strengthening their commitment, parents and *dhukun pandita* always socialize disastrous corollary, *walat*, for individual who does not believe and practice the ancestor’s teachings. The socialization of *walat* has obvious effect in diminishing secular and free thinking among the young generation, although not all. Most of Tenggerese young people involve in rituals, both individual/family and communal rituals as *Kasada*, an annually offering ritual in Mount Bromo as thanksgiving expression for their success in agricultural and tourism works and *Entas-entas*, a final death ritual by burning *Petra*—a doll made from grasses—symbolizing the dead body.

This ritual preservation shows how the local people do not want to take modern principles completely, especially rationality and individualism, although in daily life they are being modern. This incompletely agreement of modernity is a deconstructive reading in the in-between space caused by ambivalence in absorbing and mimicking the hegemonic cultural discourses and practices that results fluid-hybrid subjectivity as subversive strategy. However, the existence of some local cultures remains some problems related to their ideological position in new cultural configuration. What I mean by ideological position here is how the local subjects conceive local cultures as the subordinate, but still can be mobilized for constructing to their cultural identity and how they perceive them under market law.

In traditional term, cultural identity is cultural symbols, practices, and values commonly sharing by members of community through long historical process [Gilbert, 2010: 2-3; Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006; D’Cruz, 2008]. Under formation of hybrid-fluid subjectivity, following Hall [1997], cultural identity is something negotiable, positioned, and becoming, based on the necessity of its members. Although modern cultures have become consensual members of the local people, for some reasons as communal scare of being cursed by supernatural power and politico necessity in encountering outsider dominant influence, they can construct and mobilize essential forms of local cultures as rituals and traditional clothing to recall internal solidarity. For Tenggerese people, the mobilization and celebration of rituals as their cultural identity, besides obeying ancestor’s tradition, is significant to empower their solidarity in preventing radical change caused by modernity. In this context, the fluid-hybrid-subjectivity, following Canclini [1994], becomes cultural strategy of the local people for entering and leaving modernity; appropriating its progress values, but rejecting its secularism and individualism—although this latter conception still can be criticized. Furthermore, the empowerment of essential cultural identity is significant for contending other religious missions which in some lower villages have converted traditional religion—Tenggerese Hindu—into Islam and Christianity.

Because the preservation of traditional cultures has been maintaining under modern atmosphere, there are some unavoidable consequences relating to the emergence of new meanings in practicing them. Firstly, the more expensive and extravagant rituals mean the higher social position for the individual or the groups conducting them. In many local communities, as in Lamongan, Banyuwangi, and Jember, private or communal rituals need much money to pay tertiary supplements as popular entertainments. Today, in Tenggerese community, a rich family who will have *walagara*, a marriage ritual, with *tayub* performance, needs prepare 200 millions rupiahs as the budget of beer, meals, and *tayub* payment. This changing of ritual meaning as the consequence of green revolution policy that has made Tenggerese people, particularly the have, conducting the expensive rituals—especially the private one—which is implying social distinction with other people.

Secondly, the intervention of state apparatuses appears commercial and profane practices in communal sacred rituals. The state apparatuses incorporate sacred ritual under *cultural tourism* label and create additional programs to attract domestic and foreigner tourists to come. In 2012 Kasada, 2-4 August 2012, for example, there were some

complement programs as dangdut live concert in Desa Wonotoro, flame parade from Desa Wonokerto to Desa Ngadisari, tayub and reog performance, volley ball competition, and celebration night at Ngadisari Hall. Although there is discursive tension between the idea of preservation in strengthening communal identity and tourism market for commercialization—Huggan [2001] calls this tension as *postcolonial exotics*, the dhukuns do not abandon the incorporation and intervention because they always teach to the people a traditional wisdom namely ‘loyalty to government’. However, the dhukuns can negotiate Tenggerese collective importance for preserving tradition in the celebration night, so the state apparatuses will give attention, especially giving facilities to the preservation.

Thirdly, although rituals are still conducted by following ancient heritage, i.e. mantras of offering, the other things as *sesajen*—important supplements for rituals—have been mixed with industrial products. Still, in 2012 Kasada, I found junk snacks used together with *sesajen* from crop as vegetables. This fact shows that modern products, as junk snacks, are becoming familiar things consumed in local milieu, so it is important for the local people to include them in the ritual. Although these snacks are small part of the ritual which is still conducted by following ancient teachings, i.e. mantras of offering, their appearance indicates hybrid cultural forms; including modern elements in the very traditional practice.

Fourthly, the coming of invited sponsors, especially for complement programs as popular performances, has coloured the sacred with capitalist discourses. It is common for the officials to give project proposal to some sponsors, usually cigarette companies, to give financial supports. As the consequence, the sponsors will place many banners for promoting their products and opening “the door to enter” the sacred activities. In critical sense, I see these banners, following Barthes [1983], as ex-nominating process of philanthropic discourse of the capitalist class and interpellation process that disseminate and naturalize the importance of capitalist products to the public [Althusser, 1971]. These processes are progressive step to incorporate the residual cultures into formation of dominant class, so the capitalist can be hegemonic [Williams, 2006]. The incorporation can succeed because the local subjects are having fluid-hybrid subjectivity in their cultural orientations and daily practices that makes them welcoming the capitalist as “important guests”. In other words, despite of its strategic function in deferring completely modern influence, the fluid-hybrid-subjectivity may open the way for disseminating and strengthening market mechanism in local sphere.

Being deconstructive towards religious authority and traditional taboos

Indeed hybridity for the local people can be, at once, a strategic and subversive way to defer the hegemonic influence of modernity and giving them a chance to recall cultural identity. However, as habitus, hybridity may also emerge *deconstructive readings* toward religious authority and traditional taboos when the local people have gotten economic problems. Because they could not plant vegetables and rent their jeeps for tourists during Mount Bromo eruption at 2010-2011, many Tenggerese people tried to find traditional answer for solving the problem. Mujono, the coordinator of dhukun pandita, explains:

In Wonokerso, there was a person getting trance and asking dhukun there to call ancestor spirits in Bromo. Forced by the people, the dhukun conducted a ritual. When he had just spelled out mantras, sand and volcanic materials had been coming. The people blamed the dhukun for having wrong procedures or mantras in the ritual. The dhukun was very afraid and did not go outside home for 8 days. Because I had gotten *wangsit* [a supernatural mystical advice] from a messenger of our ancestors in Bromo, I decided to go there and explained to the people that the dhukun was not wrong. I told them the *wangsit* that said Tenggerese people need to be patient and always compact, do not blame each other. I also said that the gods will substitute all of damage with the newer welfare, from vegetables farms and tourism activities. Finally, they could understand the situation and did not blame the dhukun anymore. [Interview, 28 July 2011]

In traditional conception, the dhukuns have prestigious position because of his distinct capacity to guide religious rituals and guard the ancestors' heritage, so Tenggerese people do appreciate them. Because of this appreciation, they believe the dhukuns can solve the very dangerous economic problems caused by Bromo eruption. In this case, I see "cultural filtration" between modern economic and traditional religious discourse in their orientation. However, when the traditional ways failed to solve the problem, Tenggerese people were confused and, finally, protested against the dhukun for conducting the wrong ritual. The ancient belief toward the dhukun supernatural capacity had been deferred and ruptured by the people when their desire of economic welfare threatened. Although, finally the coordinator of dhukun pandita could handle the protest by explaining mystical advice and discourse of welfare substitution after the eruption, it shows that Tenggerese people have been brave to deconstruct the religious authority—something forbidden in their local wisdom. Indeed the religious leaders are still becoming a residual-but-dominant subject that in collaboration with the formal leader will determine the communal acceptance of ancestor's traditions, but the people begin contesting their power when their modern economic orientation is in dangerous state.

In other context of deconstructive practice, today some Tenggerese youths begin having pre-marital sex. As a cultural taboo, the pre-marital sex will pollute the sacredness of Tenggerese territory as *hila-hila*, a sacred land, which requires the people avoiding the forbidden profane practices. If they did the practices, the people will get bad consequence as sickness. However, the coming of information technology as internet and media as television to this sacred territory that carries some profane narratives, as sexual freedom, gives a newer cultural discourse which can drive some youths to mimic it, contending the ancient taboo. Although they still join the rituals and hear the dhukun's wise teachings, their intensive watching of porn videos from internet and cellular telephone, make them brave to have pre-marital sex. In other words, the intensive teaching of traditional religious cultures cannot guarantee their completely acceptance when the people, particularly the youths, find a new way to express their individual freedom. Although individualism does not become hegemonic discursive formation in the local sphere, its effects for freedom begin seeding—although not at all aspects—and make some traditional taboos are being contended by some individuals who want to celebrate freedom as they saw from media narratives.

Still relating to taboo, Tenggerese people have unique deconstructive reading and practices toward *mendem*, drunk. According to Sutomo, *mendem* is not a new practice because since the ancient era, Tenggerese people have been accustomed to alcoholic drink, particularly in *tayub* show. As other local people, they drank *tuwak* and *arak*, two kinds of traditional alcoholic drink before the coming of beer. Today, beer is popular alcoholic drink consumed in *tayub* show. Although in every day life, beer is forbidden to consume, especially in public space, in *tayub* show, men from young generation to old generation are free to drink it. Regional beer distributor supplies them with a box car. This practice is 'for a while freedom' which making the people free from the cultural taboo. The dhukuns do not inhibit this practice because it is only a kind of celebratory event and not in every day life they drunk. However, some dhukuns, as Sutomo and Mujono, begin realizing that drinking beer in *tayub* show will devalue aesthetic performance because many participants in the show do not concern about beautiful quality of the dance and only show drinking activity. It is different to the same practice in the past that still emphasized the quality of dance. Accordingly, in the internal structure of traditional cultures themselves, there is deconstructive potency, particularly when permissiveness of ancient profane practice transformed into modern practice is becoming ordinary.

Concluding remarks

I had just explained briefly about local complex by using cultural appropriations toward projects of modernity in Tenggerese community to support my arguments. Once again, local complex is a complicated cultural condition in which the local people understanding, mimicking, absorbing, and appropriating some core patterns of modernity projects as economic progress, secularism, and education into their communal life that create fluid-hybrid subjectivity. This subjectivity, at least, makes the local people play in the core of modernity without losing all their traditional cultures that are being transformed and preserved for the importance of their collectiveness in constructing cultural identity from which they can build ideological strategy to face dominant discursive influences. However, this subjectivity also emerges deconstructive potency towards traditional cultures caused by the local people's in-betweenness in which modern discourses being hegemonic.

For me, local complex becomes a starting point to discuss critically about local societies and their complicated cultures under the influences of modernity projects, particularly capitalism and rationalism. At least, there are four topics to discuss local societies and cultures. Firstly is the shifting and changing of cultural orientation in all aspects of life among the local people caused by the hegemony of market capitalism, particularly consumerism. Secondly, we can research the effect of metropolitan media narratives toward local cultures, both in private and public sphere. Thirdly, the local strategies in appropriating modern narratives and their complicated process are interesting to discuss because we can see cultural tensions in negotiating and transforming communal cultures under modern pathway. Fourthly is the coming of capitalist agents who mobilize and incorporate local uniqueness and exoticism under label of cultural tourism projects and the response the local people toward the projects. Fifthly, following the hegemonic issue of ecological problem, it is important to study the local people perception toward their environment when economic desire may drive them to conquer and exploit the nature.

Finally, I want to give some new considerations of postcolonial studies based on my brief analysis. Not like as Parry [2004], Dirlik [2002], and Majid [2008] who criticize postcolonial studies for over-emphasizing narrative structures [signification/representation/discourse] and every day post-colonial cultures related to mimicry and mockery, in-betweenness, hybridity, that make postcolonial thinkers being not sensitive to capitalism hegemony, I conceptualize some seminal considerations as follow.

The first, postcolonial studies need to include political economy consideration to analyze fluid-hybrid subjectivity in the local societies because it is important to read critically the influence of capitalism towards socio-cultural process. The second, indeed theory of hybridity can explain the complicated cultural process in the local sphere and the subversive strategy of the local people to appropriate modernity, but it is significant to see the ideological position of traditional and modern cultures under such hybrid identity. In addition, what needs to criticize more is the potency of fluid-hybrid-subjectivity in driving the post-colonial people to accept market capitalism. The third, paying attention on the changing of traditional cultures into modern direction and how the state and the capitalist incorporate it will juxtapose postcolonial studies and political economy perspective as a new bridge to do more comprehensive research in local sphere.

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