

Villagers of Taruban Preserve The Environment Through Myths and Rituals

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Abstract

This paper will present about the legend of Jaka Tarub which is orally transmitted from one generation to next generation. The transmission of the legend/myths is seen as preserving local values or local wisdom (Roland Barthes). It will analyze how the legend is associated with a tree in the village of Taruban, Kulonprogo, Yogyakarta. It will specifically analyze how the relationship between villagers who perform rituals and the tree associated with the legend. Building upon the insights of scholars like Bird-David (1999) and Hallowell (1975), this paper will show that the villagers engage in “inter-personal” relationship with the tree. The people recognize and perceive the tree as a person who has the ability to care, take and give. Their relation between trees and villagers of Taruban, Kulonprogo, following the villagers’ perception, is mutually and equally beneficial and responsible. Based on such a perception, the villagers perform an annual ritual through which they give (or share) offering, and engage in protection and preservation of the tree. They prohibit cutting off the trees. There are four big trees (sites) associated to the legend: Wit Sambi (around the Jaka Tarub and Dewi Nawangwulan graves), Petilasan Baru Klinthing, Ki Bagus Kemis and Sendang Kamulyan. Those sites are respected and protected. In return, the villagers understand that water and fertile soil for plantations are gifts they deserve. This paper will finally argue that villagers of Taruban have committed to such a kind of environmental and ecological conservation based on their local wisdom (annual ritual).

Keywords : myth, ritual, preservation, environment & ecological conservation

Background

There are at least five points in Desa Taruban-Kulonprogo, consist of big trees that protected and respected with once a year-ritual. This annual event –called as Bersih Desa, is only held in time after harvesting because most of the villagers are farmers who plant rice, and the ritual is purposed to celebrate their successful works in the paddi field and to grateful for the harvesting. They arrange tayuban –a communal dance lead by four or more profesional female dances at night and organize rituals in the some important sites in the next day. Those important sites are Sendang Kamulyan, Jaka Tarub & Dewi Nawangwulan graves, Petilasan Baruklinthing, Petilasan Ki Bagus Kemis, and a very big tree called Wit Sambi. Four of those five sites are about respecting and protecting big trees. Beside the annual event, villagers also give offerings to them in particular days.

Bersih Desa in Taruban Village is being problematic in accordance with term of religion that has been used to understand this practice. From the oral story¹ inherited generation to generation that still preserved up to now, shows that the practice has conducted in centuries ago, approximately, long before the period of the emergence of Mataram Islam in Kotagede. The ritual has been modified for a adjustment to avoid being called as a devian. The using of Arabic language in prayer during the ritual in grave and in some big trees around the village is example of the adjustment. In the way to understand the indigenous phenomena accured in Desa Taruban-Kulonprogo, I will start with questions to lead for more discussions :

1. How do the ritual and myth preserve ecology in Taruban Village?
2. What is the challenge so that the villagers have to transmit the myth and conduct the ritual?

Literature Review

When discussing about myth, Roland Barthes is scholar who thought out and argued about it in his book titled Mythologies. He advocates that myth is a type of speech, a system of communication, that it is a message (Barthes, 1975). Although it is not any type of language but it is a language that needs special conditions which is

¹ Interview with Pak Joyo Sepur, a key person of Taruban Village. He is the last person who knows all the myth story of Jaka Tarub and the emergence of the village that transmitted only by oral in every special occasion of villagers gathering.

conveyed by a discourse in order to become myth. Building upon this insight, this paper will show the story of Jaka Tarub and also the narration behind the big trees in the village are type of communication that convey a message from generation to generation.

In the very beginning, Timothy Fitzgerald on his book titled *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, criticize term 'religion' that have been used by many scholars. There is a common-sense use of 'religion' that refers to belief in gods or the supernatural that has connection with churches, synagogues, mosques and temples (Fitzgerald, 2000). According to him, this is really an extension of the traditional European usage; 'religion' was traditionally used to mean something like faith in God or faith in Jesus Christ and in the church and priesthood who serve him. His critique about the using of word 'religion' as global term rooted from a historical process of western imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism. It articulates a relationship between imperialist western polities and their colonized native elites, or between the dominant culture of a western nation and its ethnic minorities.

As a term, 'religion' has its own characteristics and also has made a distinctions to non-religion. This is the impact of meaning of religion related to the Christianity or other world religion, that the rest of it is marginal and understood as a misleading. I saw a phenomena that has been determined as a non-religious practice in Taruban Village because its ritual does not have relation with any of world religions. They conduct a ritual at a particular time regularly, once a year after harvesting in rice field, named Bersih Desa. It might be the same in essence with any Bersih Desa ritual in many areas of Yogyakarta but in Taruban Village, there is a additional meaning regarding to the myth that has been still preserved and has special purposes related to the environment.

Another way to understand the phenomena in Taruban Village, I will use the observation Nurit Bird-David with Nayaka people. She has attempts to develop approaches to a fresh visit to the animism concept (Tylor, 1958) and to the indigenous phenomena. She conduct a solution on a synthesis of current environment theory (insisting that the environment does not necessarily consist dichotomously of a physical world and humans) and current personhood theory (asserting that

personhood does not necessarily consist dualistically of body and spirit (Bird-David, 1999). She argues that positivistic ideas about the meaning 'nature', 'life' and 'personhood' misdirected these previous attempts to understand the local concept. Then she divides the explanations into two concepts, personhood and ecological perception to see differences between modernist and the previous one through her research on Nayaka, a hunter-gatherer community of the forested Gir Valley in the Nilgiri region of South India. Her findings will be useful to understand inter-personal relation between villagers of Taruban and the big trees that respected and protected by them.

Hallowell is another scholar that gives an alternative approaches to observe what is the purpose of myth and also the ritual are still needed to be conducted. It will lead to an observation why the people still hold on the myth of Jaka Tarub and prepare the ritual of *bersih desa* annually. He analyzes the Ojibwa –native America with its term of 'grandfathers' to describe the relation with the ancestors as sources of power for human beings through blessing. Grandfather term does not only refers to human but also to spiritual beings that called as 'other than human' (Hallowell, 1960). I found the similiarity in Taruban, how the relation between the villagers and Jaka Tarub as ancestor and big trees as 'other than human' that directed rituals for blessings.

Materials and Methods

The methodology of this paper is a qualitative research with purposes to have deep observation on the phenomena of Taruban villagers. The data arranged from the literatures that have been written before, oral stories that have been transmitted by Pak Joyo Sepur –an interviewed key person that told the story of Jaka Tarub, and also by seeing the behavior of the villagers related to the myth and ritual.

The research has conducted in Taruban village, Kelurahan Tuksono, Kecamatan Sentolo, Kabupaten Kulon Progo, Special District of Yogyakarta. It is located 23 km in northwest of Yogyakarta. According to BPMPT (Badan Penanaman Modal dan Perizinan Terpadu) of Kulon Progo stated that Sentolo is one of the potensial areas covered 4.796 hectares for industry (Harian Jogja: June 12, 201). The local government is welcoming investors to build enterprise in Sentolo to absorb labours from local people in surroundings. There is a challenge for people around with the

industry that produce financial benefits but it might disrupt the ecology of the place where they live.

This paper will show that villagers of Taruban has been preserving the myth and ritual from time to time for ecological reason. As mentioned earlier at the literature reviews, this research is in order to get an understanding of indigenous phenomena in Taruban with new approaches. A reconceptualization of term religion is offered to have more adequate term for the phenomena, exclude it from world religion legitimation. Because world religion will said that these practices are misleading and should be avoided. But actually there is a worldview that we have to consider why the villagers do this kind of practices and for what purposes they conduct this annual ritual. This research also develops a refresh approach to understand the ritual that based on some myths preserved by elders to the youngers from generation to generation orally.

I would like to have an approach of understanding the phenomena with its traditional and local values, trying to respect it as a religious practice with the same view of the villagers and avoiding the misleading judgmental that given to it. Timothy Fitzgerald's representation to disrupt the old term to shift its meaning to be more adequate to all practices and community in the world, will be used for a general view. Then, the way of Nurid Birth-David observed the Nayaka, a hunter-gatherer community of the forested Giri Valley in the Nilgiri region of South India, will be very helpful to give another insight on how to see the specific phenomena appropriately. Hallowell's perspective on 'grandfather' and the power sources term will be added to have answer why the myth and rituals have to be conducted and for what is the purpose of it.

Results and Discussion

According to Fitzgerald, there are paradigm and methodologist underlay the representations, a problematic field of religion that unhelpful and inapplicable to studying indigenous religions are :

1. The dominant enumerative theology

Through his mainly ethnographic focus on India and Japan, Fitzgerald could show that the word 'religion' is analytical redundant and even misleading in the

context of two important cultures India & Japan). He is not anti-theologian, but he pretends to remark that theology masquerading as objective scientific research. Furthermore he stated that it has no useful role to play as a scholarly analytic tool, and that because of its historical role in the development of the dominant ideology of the modern West.

Since it has to be recognized as a religion, the ritual of Bersih Desa in Taruban is stated as a misleading. With accordance to the one of the World Religion, which is Islam as the dominant influence of the surrounding, burning the kemenyan, flower offering, to the grave and big trees is kind of deviant. They have to adjust to it, as the ritual nowadays using the Arabic language and leave the Javanese words to pray.

2. Reconceptualization of religious representation

Fitzgerald argues on the paradigm and methodologist underlay the representations, that not all scholars who works in religion departments are religionists who believe in a world of faith understood as responses to the One Divine, The Real or who accept a phenomenological claim about the uniqueness of religion. They have working with various theoretical and methodological disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, but not to religious studies. Then he purposes to have a reconceptualization that religious studies be rethought and rerepresented as the study of the institutions and the institutionalized values of specific societies, and the relation between those institutionalized values and the legitimation of power. He means institution as a broad concept of anything that given collective recognition and value by some specific group of people, whether it is, for example, a classification system, status, rite, idea, story, object, place, procedure, or form of relationship, concept of a transcendent or superhuman agency, or kind of animal: it could be anything that is imbued with deep collective significance and that transcends any particular individual or time.

Referring the notion above, we could not be able to see every religious phenomena with the angle of world religion's view. The ritual arranged in Taruban Village is kind of special and has to be differentiated with another to see

its original values. They have their own reason to conduct the ritual based on the long-live myth so called the legend of Jaka Tarub & Dewi Nawangwulan. This is a transcendent belief that interwoven in relation between their living with three elements; environment, Jaka Tarub as their ancestor and with the Supreme Being. They prepare the flower offering, burning kemenyan and chanting the prayer as a religious practice to have a relation between those three of elements. This ritual has been conducted by individual in a particular day. But once a year, this practice is set to be a collective ritual involving many members of the village as a gratitude to the nature for giving them successful harvests.

In Hallowell's perspective, the ancestor such as Jaka Tarub & Dewi Nawangwulan refers to term of grandfather as he observed on Ojibwa people. This term is not only applied to human persons but also to spiritual being who are persons of a category other-than-human.(Hallowell, 21). Some big trees that respected and protected by villagers of Taruban are recognized as persons of a category other-than-human. They are sources of power for the villagers through blessings they bestow through prays and rituals. With those blessings, they wish getting more of harvesting years ahead and getting save from harm and poverty.

Personhood concept

According to Bird-David, personhood which are attributed to some natural entities, animals, winds, stones, etc, is fundamentally different from the modernist one. The latter, split it into only human and non-human as essential, with person being subcategory of human. The local conceives of person as an overarching category within which human person, animal person, wind person, etc. Taruban villagers give attribute to three elements mentioned above, as persons. The connection between them is like relation to a person. Big trees are recognized as persons who able to give and take something in the relation. Because of it villagers maintain the good relation between them with giving a flower offering for the big trees, burning the kemenyan and conserve the trees. They believe that trees will give them mutually their needs of water and fertile soil to plant the rice. If they do the contrary, they also believe that big trees will taking back the fertile and the water from the village.

The reason behind respecting the grave of Jaka Tarub and Dewi Nawangwulan is similar. They believe in the myth of them that they are ancestors. Ritual like prayer and offerings for both of the ancestors are still conducted. The relation between them is taking and giving mutually. Villagers believe that they still have been engaged with the ancestors as a person who able to give a spiritual matter.

Ecological Perception

Nayaka people engage intimately with their environment. They celebrate animistic performances that constitute a participation frame, double bind engagement which co-privileges utilizing and respecting animated things. In the western context, people animate the computer, plants, cars, and so on, rationally people frame them. In addition to making them as objects. Similar with Nayaka people in India, Taruban Villagers also have an ecological perception with their own language in accordance with their behaviour addressed to the big trees in around them. Since they recognized the big trees as persons, and the relation is mutual take and give, they conduct the ritual to maintain the relationship. They are prohibited to cut the trees and doing harm action that affected to the live of the trees. In this case, very clearly shows that Taruban villagers have perception to conserve the ecology.

This is the main point of this paper that recently, for what purposes of the preservation of myth and ritual. Recently, the government attempts to have more financial benefit and to absorb the unemployments by welcoming more investors to build industry in Sentolo, Kulon Progo (Kedaulatan Rakyat Online, May 29, 2014). Particularly in Tuksono, as BKPM (Badan Kerjasama dan Penanaman Modal) Special District of Yogyakarta said that will develop Tuksono become industrial area for textiles, industrial medicine, furniture, electronic components, computer assembly, high technology, IT, metals, machinery, electronics, chemical, and warehousing services. This is a serious threat for the environment. Thousands hectares of plantation land will be changed to be industrial land.

Myth and ritual with its prohibition to cut off the trees, respecting the land of ancestors and protecting the water spring (Sendang Kamulyan) apparently the anchors of the conservation.



Picture 1.1 : 35 hectares industrial area of CV. Karya Hidup Sentosa (Quick tractors factory) is only a few kilometres from Taruban Village and 1 km from Progo River.

Source : Google Earth (2014, September 20)

Conclusion

This paper has significant roles to give new approaches that are more appropriate and equal to indigenous practices in Taruban. Timothy Fitzgerald pursues efforts of post colonialists to release the boundaries that limited them only compared with the world religion term. It is a new challenge that has to be resounded when talking about indigenous religion.

Another way to release the world religion bondages to the indigenous religion, Nurit Bird-David advocates personhood concept and ecological perception to understand every different phenomena. Based on her research in Nayaka people in India, I could use it to observe the religious experience in Taruban Village in Kulonprogo.

Their relation to three elements; big trees, grave of Jaka Tarub & Dewi Nawangwulan and also the Supreme Being is mutual and equal according to Bird-David's personhood. Taking and giving are tools to maintain the relationship between them. Rituals conducted to give balance from the nature, in form of giving offering, prohibition to cut off the trees and respect them as other persons. While

water and fertile soil for plantations are gifts from the nature. A blessings from the ancestors are sources of power for the villagers. They wish to be blessed for being saved from harm, for wealthier, healthier and long live.

This ritual is still alive up to now because of well preserved myth orally. It is undertood that the mythology advocates by Roland Barthes is needed to have an understanding that myth is a type of speech to preserve values wrapped in legends and stories. This is what happen in the Taruban Village, myth of the big trees and ancestors are still preserved to transmitt the values.

The local values are needed to protect the danger of industrialization that will be absorbed soon in this area. The welcoming of the local government to investors seems to be a threat for the ecology. But for sure, through myth and ritual, villagers of Taruban will become the guardians to protect the environment when the investors come and plant the industries over their land.

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