

Preserving Local Culture in the Globalization Era through *Merti Bumi*: A Project Report

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Abstract

Globalization has a number of consequences either good or bad related to economic, political, cultural aspects, and so on. The people living in Kaliurang, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for instance, have their own way to manage possible impacts of globalization by preserving local cultures. The purpose of this report is to discuss the ritual of *Merti Bumi* as it is assumed that this ceremony is not simply a tradition of thanksgiving for bountiful harvest. This project report intensively reviews current literature, which is selected for synthesis based on its relevance to the topic under study. In addition, unstructured interviews with a former member of *Pangesti Jawi* has been carried out to add to the information gained from the literature. It is found that *Merti Bumi* is categorized in terms of informational beliefs which need to be stated and handed down from generation to generation. The ritual is then shared, learned, practiced, and becomes a group of values in Javanese culture. These beliefs and values then become cultural knowledge among members of Javanese culture. Furthermore, *Merti Bumi* is a medium to bridge the local-global dichotomy. The ritual always focuses on universal issues, such as maintaining a harmonious life with nature presented in a local way.

Key Words: globalization, merti bumi, pangesti jawi, cultural knowledge.

Introduction

This report is about the ritual of *Merti Bumi* held in Kaliurang, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This particular aspect of Indonesian culture has been investigated

due to the reason that the ritual is considered as a medium to bridge the local-global dichotomy.

There are two sections in this report: the first briefly reviews previous works on *Merti Bumi*. The second section discusses globalization and its impact, Javanese beliefs and values system, and the ritual of *Merti Bumi* in Kaliurang and its purpose.

Method

Literature investigation is the method used in this project report. Current literature focusing on Javanese values and beliefs system to establish knowledge of how Javanese people maintain local culture was reviewed.

In addition, unstructured interview with Mr. Sunarhadi, a former member of *Pangesti Jawi* was carried out. Unstructured interview is a type of interview, which has no strict schedule to follow and its structure is flexible. Content, wording, order of the questions and other elements of the interview are changeable (Sarantakos 178). This type of interview is vital to establish knowledge of how people living in Kaliurang have been attempting to maintain and promote local culture in the globalization era.

Brief Review of the Literature

In fact, there were very few researches conducted in Indonesia about the ritual of *Merti Bumi*. Moreover, those previous studies only focused on the explanation about local values presented in the ritual (i.e. Isyanti 2007; Rohjiyati 2009). More specifically, those studies explained that *Merti Bumi* is one of Java's traditional ceremonies commonly held in some regions of Yogyakarta as a medium to preserve the indigenous heritage as well as a celebration for a good harvest. Through *Merti Bumi*, Javanese people attempt to maintain the relationship between God and human beings. In addition, they remind themselves to manage and preserve the environment. In brief, the previous studies are unable to view *Merti Bumi* from a different perspective. It seems that they are stuck on the detailed explanation about the ritual itself.

In my opinion, it would be a plus if those studies could at least touch on the relationship between the ritual and globalization, which leads to a critical question: what is the universal value behind the ritual? This project is, therefore, significant in terms of filling this gap in the hope that it will add to the body of knowledge of cultural sciences.

Discussion

Globalization and Its Impact

It is not an easy task to define globalization, as it is a complex term. In general, this notion refers to “a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities” (Al-Rodhan 2). We need to be aware of these words, as it is generally accepted that globalization has either positive or negative consequences. An anonymous article published in 1999 argues that one of globalization’s consequences is “the emergence of an increasingly western-dominated international culture, a trend which has sparked concern about the erosion of national identity and traditional values in many Asian countries” (*Globalization in Asia: Getting the Breeze without the Bugs* 1). Every nation, therefore, needs specific strategies to prepare, manage, and find a solution for the possible impact of globalization that could threaten the existence of national identity and local cultures.

Indonesia as one of the countries in Southeast Asia has been attempting to manage the possible impact of globalization. The example of such an attempt is preserving and promoting local cultures. Kaliurang, which is located about eight kilometers from Mount Merapi in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, for instance, has shown the strategy to preserve and promote its local culture through *Merti Bumi*. I assume that it is not simply a ceremony of thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest. Instead, it is a medium to bridge the local-global dichotomy. Important issues, such as a flourishing indigenous heritage and living in harmony with nature have become the emphasis of this tradition.

It is important to note, however, that *Merti Bumi* is not only held regularly in Kaliurang but also in various regions of Yogyakarta, such as in Turi and Prambanan, where most of the population are working on agriculture. It is generally accepted that Javanese people believe that traditional values, which lead to a peaceful life, need to be preserved (Saksono and Dwiyanto 37). This explanation implies that although Javanese people live in the global era where the advancement of information and technology allows them to easily pick up new agricultural methods to improve the harvest, they still rely on traditional rituals handed down from generation to generation. In other words, most farmers in those regions are attempting to survive in the age of globalization without neglecting traditional values.

An Overview of Javanese Values and Beliefs System

This part presents an overview of Javanese values and beliefs systems in order to provide insights into its culture. The ritual of *Merti Bumi* in Kaliurang and its purpose will then be outlined.

Javanese people have many traditional ceremonies, which cannot be separated from cross-cultural beliefs and values system. American Heritage Dictionary explains that beliefs refer to “mental acceptance or conviction in the truth or actuality of something” (qtd. in Damen 9). There are three types of beliefs, namely experimental, informational, and inferential (Damen 191). The ritual of *Merti Bumi* in this project can be categorized in terms of informational beliefs. Damen further explains that these beliefs need to be stated and handed down from generation to generation. Informational beliefs are transferred by a group of people or authority figures who are able to convince others that the beliefs need to be learned and then be practiced. In the case of the ritual of *Merti Bumi*, the authority figures are older generations. This ritual is shared, learned, and practiced from generation to generation and becomes a set of values in Javanese culture, which are considered to be good, proper, and positive.

Beliefs and values then become cultural knowledge, which means they are absorbed into the collective knowledge shared among members of a particular culture (Sharifian 121). This statement implies that the tradition of *Merti Bumi* in this project, for example, has become cultural knowledge among members of Javanese culture, which is depicted in cultural schemata.

The members of Javanese culture negotiate and renegotiate these schemata and then transfer them to newer generations. The term “culture” itself can be defined as the shared way of life created by a group of people, which is different from another group in order to be able to respond to social phenomena (Hofstede 51; Lederach 9).

The Ritual of *Merti Bumi* in Kaliurang and Its Purpose

The information about the tradition of *Merti Bumi* in Kaliurang presented below is obtained from an unstructured interview via e-mail with Mr. Sunarhadi, a former member of *Pengesti Jawi*, an organization whose responsibility is to handle the ritual. The members of *Pangesti Jawi* also conduct several activities related to Javanese culture, such as promoting

traditional language, songs, etc. Mr. Sunarhadi has agreed to be mentioned in this project.

The term *Merti Bumi* came from Javanese words, which are, *petri/memetri* (maintain) and *bumi* (earth). *Merti Bumi*, therefore, can be defined as maintaining mother earth or nature. The ritual of *Merti Bumi* in Kaliurang is usually held on the Islamic New Year's eve. During the ceremony, the participants wear traditional clothes. It is important to note that the participants of the ritual are not limited to the members of *Pangesti Jawi*. All the people living in Kaliurang are welcome to participate in the ceremony (unstructured interview November 2011).

Furthermore, Sunarhadi (unstructured interview November 2011) explains that there are several activities that need to be done before, during, and after the ceremony, such as: preparing *sesajen* (offerings), taking water from seven sources, *kirab broto* (parading the street for about five kilometers while the participants are not allowed to communicate with each other), and praying.

A day before the ritual, all of the participants need to prepare *sesajen* as a means of symbolic communication with the supernatural world. *Sesajen* are usually traditional foods, flowers, such as red and white roses, and also Javanese incense. They then put these offerings in several places chosen by a group of authority figures.

It is important to note that most of the participants are Muslims. However, they are also influenced by Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and concepts. Koentjaraningrat argues "Javanese Muslims also believe in a great many other religious concepts, supernatural beings, and powers, and they also perform many religious ceremonies, which have little connection with the official religious doctrines of Islam" (317). This is the reason why they use offerings in the ritual.

Another activity needs to be done before the ceremony is taking water from seven sources as a symbol of the soul's purification. The water is also used to wash traditional weapons, such as *keris* and *tombak*. The participants then carry these weapons during *kirab broto* while praying to ask for blessings from God and the deceased ancestors. Here, maintaining silence enables the participants to focus on their prayer (unstructured interview December 2011).

In general, *Merti Bumi* while held in several regions in Yogyakarta has the same purpose in different locations. Through the ritual, Javanese people want to maintain the harmony between nature and human beings, which leads to a peaceful life. It is also mentioned in the previous part of the project that *Merti Bumi* is a ceremony of thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest. For the ritual held in Kaliurang, however, it has special purpose, which is, avoiding natural disaster especially the eruption of Mount Merapi.

If we take a closer look at the general purpose of the ritual, we will find that *Merti Bumi* has its own message, which is, we need to be friendly with nature. If we always attempt to maintain a harmonious life with nature by using it for our purpose wisely, we will obtain a good harvest and a peaceful life.

In the case of *Merti Bumi* held in Kaliurang, there is an interesting fact. Although most of the people living in this region are not working in the agricultural sector but in tourism, they are interested in organizing *Merti Bumi* regularly. This shows their awareness of environmental issues. Preserving the health and sustainability of the environment is not merely farmers' responsibility. Instead, this is the duty of everyone. In short, the ritual of *Merti Bumi* can be seen as an alternative solution to solve one of global problems, which is, the environment's threatened degradation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

It was shown in the literature that globalization is a term difficult to define. In short, this notion refers to a process of assimilation and integration among countries with a possible negative impact on the existence of national identity.

Indonesia as an Asian country has its own strategy to manage such kinds of possible impact by preserving and promoting local cultures. The ritual of *Merti Bumi* held regularly in Kaliurang, Yogyakarta could be used as an example for others to follow if they wish to maintain their cultural and physical environments which seem to be organically related to each other. Through our discussion of the ceremony, we have learnt how the local people always attempt to live in harmony with nature in the hope that this region will be able to avoid natural disaster, especially the eruption of Mount Merapi.

However, *Merti Bumi* is only one Javanese tradition. Further study in the area of Javanese culture would be beneficial in helping the young generations to

understand that living in the age of globalization does not necessarily mean ignoring traditional values.

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