

What Stories The Forests Tell You: Myths as Part of Forest Conservation Dynamics

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Abstract— In traditional concepts of forest management, Mangkunegaran government did not merely adopt colonial regulations, but also relied on traditional values that already exist and grow in Javanese society like local wisdom and local knowledge related to forest conservation. It also becomes the Mangkunegara VII wisdom to do realize the reforestation policies. In addition to reforest Wonogiri, which had become a critical land due to the abandonment of land after being used as coffee plantation during the colonial period, The Mangkunegara VII also built facilities and infrastructures that support the sustainability of the forest in this area, such as improvement of waterways, irrigations and construction of several reservoirs. The story of the Javanese forest is mostly an oral tradition that contains a mixture of reality, myths and a set of prohibitions recounted from generation to generation repeatedly and agreed upon the truth. From the story the generation can learn and take many lessons, such as history, geography, and what is no less important is the norm and ethics of living together with nature.

Keywords—conservation, forest, local wisdom, mangkunegara

I. INTRODUCTION

Forests (Alas, Wana: java term.) and mountains are two natural phenomena which are central sites for Javanese people. Both are believed to be areas with natural power complexity not only outwardly but also sacred-spiritual-magical and mystical. The existence of forests in many historical episodes of Javanese kingdoms always stands as the beginning or embryo of territories while the mountain acts as its cosmic pillar. In the story of *wayang*, Alas Wanamarta or Mertani forest is the forerunner of the kingdom of Amarta. Babat Tanah Jawi also reported that the kingdom of Mataram (Islam) was founded on the Mentaok forest which was a gift for Ki Ageng Pemanahan. Although mixed with various myths, history records the existence of Wonokarto forest as the initial area of the Kartasura kingdom before moving to the Bengawan Sala valley and changing its name to Surakarta. Likewise, with the story of Prince *Sambernyawa* to get the Mangkunegaran area, which uses the Nglaroh forest in Wonogiri as the basis of his struggle.

Local wisdom is born from the ability of humans to observe and trace the causes of an event and then be used as a reference for determining the next action. That later

gave birth to rituals and traditions, this was due to the internal agreement of the community to jointly maintain the continuity and balance of life with nature. Rituals can be in the form of endeavors to offer requests for prayers or as a form of gratitude for the stable conditions that are felt in a certain period of time by all members of the community.

In the context of maintaining the balance of the ecosystem, various rituals or traditions become a backrest for the community to balance the fulfillment of needs and environmental sustainability. Or in the concept of Java, it is interpreted as the balance of the big universe and the small universe. In Javanese culture, layers and division of society are divided into two, large traditions and small traditions. The great tradition is filled by noble communities while the small tradition is mostly among the people. The ruler of a great tradition is considered and considers himself a representation of the gods so that he has a kind of legality to perpetuate his hegemony, including controlling the territory inhabited by small tradition communities.

Forests make an extraordinary contribution to human life. The people who live around the forest can directly exploit it, as well as those who use other forest products as commodities that have high economic value. Forest benefits do not only have physical benefits, such as wood, plants and fauna; but also, non-physical benefits, such as environmental, social, political and cultural benefits. Further, ecological benefits of forests is as guardians of ecosystem balance, as well as providers of biodiversity. Sociologically, the forest becomes a symbol of community life, both those who live around the forest, and those outside the forest ecosystem. In many historical sources, both documentary and non-documentary, forests also influence the political decision making of a ruler. Some myths, local traditions and art that emerge among the community are thought to have links to the existence of forests, which have a background in efforts to preserve forests. This means to unite citizens, to the tools used to legitimize power.

This study seeks to explore the values of local wisdom in forest management, including forests in the Mangkunegaran region. In this study there are several problems which include understanding of the concept of forests according to the Javanese, local Javanese myths

about protecting the environment and forests as a symbol of power from a government.

The issue of control and management of the area is a classic conversation that has never been over discussed. The issue covers reconstructing conversation and the deconstruction. When intersecting with territories, the most closely related to a problem that intersects with ecology. A suitable domain for dissecting it is Political Ecology, a study that emphasizes the conditions and political consequences of environmental changes that occur. As stated in [1], the definition of political ecology is a combination of attention from ecology and political economy in a broad sense, namely the dialectic between people and land-based resources and also the dialectics between classes and groups in society itself. In the interface there was also an understanding of Environmental Politics, which in the view of [2] is one branch of science that studies human behavior and efforts in organizing itself to protect its interests, especially those related to the environment.

II. METHODS

This research used historical research methods, the stages of which included heuristics, criticism, interpretation and historiography. Documents that used in heuristic processes of collecting resources and data were Kumpulan cerita rakyat Wonogiri, Babad Panambangan and Serat Babad Warni-Warni from the collection of *ReksoPustaka library, Mangkunegaran Palace Solo*. Hilmiyah D.P., *Peringatan 100 tahun wafatnya KGPAA Mangkunegara V, Surakarta, 1996*. The data illustrates how Surakarta people interpret forests and forest environments as part of their daily lives. The other data I used in this study was the interview with several informants who lived in Surakarta and Wonogiri. The data collection, then went through the source criticism process to find out its validity and attentiveness.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Myths That Were Intentionally Formed and Preserved to Maintain The Existence of The Forest*

Instead of physical efforts, culturally, the local community also had a number of myths or beliefs related to environmental conservation efforts. It is not only about the forest, but also about the ecosystem in it. Like the protection of poultry, Cacak Ijo, which is trusted by the Puter villagers, in Nguter-Wonogiri Subdistrict; the prohibition on hunting deer or it is called *Menjanganin* the language of the local people that is strongly trusted by the Ngepring-Wonogiri villagers; the ban on killing anteaters because it is believed to be a protector of the village by Tirip-Wonogiri people; as well as the protection of wildfowl animals that are believed to be protective birds of Kulur villagers in the Keduwang sub-district Wonogiri [3]. The believe in a number of myths about these animals in addition is to protect animals and this also has consequence of preserving their natural habitat, indirectly

maintaining the existence of its ecosystem, that is the forest.

Besides animals, a number of plants are also believed to be sacred valued plants that should be always maintained. One of them is the *kepel* fruit. It is believed by the Tirto Wonogiri villagers to endure hunger. Moreover, local villagers also believe that *kepel* can predict agricultural yields in a period of planting; whether the farmers will succeed or fail to have a harvest. Other plants which are then posted as sacred plants include Teak tree forest, Tamarind tree, *Winong* tree, Coconut tree, and Bamboo clumps. The existence of plants that are believed to have a connection with the existence of a place, village or *petilasan*. Then, that makes local people have awareness to maintain their sustainability. Even then, the myth deliberately continues to be brought to life through certain rituals that are carried out periodically and reinforced by the legendary stories that accompany their existence.

The existence of the myths as an effort to preserve the nature has become part of traditional community life. Myth was created to explain something that is hard to explain for the sake of legitimizing a power. The formation of myth is very depended on the culture of society where the myths birth, the conditions that encourage the birth of the myths and in what context the myths were created. The myths are also associated with the political environment of the authorities and are perpetuated for certain purposes. As explained by [4] in their writings, "Rediscovery of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as Adaptive Management":

Some traditional knowledge and management systems were characterized using local ecological knowledge to interpret and respond to feedbacks from the environment to guide the direction of resource management. These traditional systems had certain similarities to adaptive management with its emphasis on feedback learning, and its treatment of uncertainty and unpredictability intrinsic to all ecosystems.

In traditional knowledge there are many things that can be learned. Ranging from types, uses, to how to live side by side with nature in a balanced manner.

Furthermore, Anthony H. John in his article *The Role of Structural Organization and Myth in Javanese Historiography*, emphasized how organizational structures and myths play a role in Javanese historiography. He asserted that European researchers suspected that there is intentional mix-up between facts and myths in the writing of the chronicles of indigenous rulers [5]. This is undoubtedly to strengthen and preserve the power of the King.

Political changes that occurred in Java bring new colors in the management of the forest. The introduction of European-based exploitative and scientific ways to manage forests replaced system of forest utilization that has local wisdom. The need to keep maintaining the existence of the kingdom requires the native rulers to change their firm perspective. However, like the rulers of Java, a ruler will not only use methods that are bureaucratic administrative in nature as rulers of microcosmos, but also use the power of myth through chronic

production which is the embodiment of the macro-cosmos ruler. Myths that are intentionally constructed by the ruler, through the power of words and imagination that are contained in, for example, the Babad, have two powers. First, myths that are consistently reflected in the understanding of most people have anthropologically same strength as constitution, which is directing, prohibiting, rewarding and imposing sanctions. Second, the myths give legitimacy to the authorities over any political or economic policies they take if the policies are related to ecology. Or, in other terms it can be stated that, ecological variables are able to dictate political choices for each economic and political transaction carried out by the authorities, and this is reflected through Babad.

A historian, Taufik Abdullah once asserted that all social ties require myth, because it proposes answers to the possibility of an imbalance between reality and logic and provides an atmosphere of credibility for the validity of the system and can also be an integrative element needed. Myth plays in the public sphere because it is part of social life, and its presence envisages the integrative atmosphere created at that time. Affirmation of the existence of myths to this day can be witnessed through ceremonies, celebrations and warnings that emerge in the community [6].

In the case of the Babad used in this study is the Babad that was produced during the Sri Mangkunegara IV period, namely Babad Panambangan written by *Pakempalan Ngarang Serating Mangkunegaran* (1918) and *Serat Babad Warna-Warni* written by Ki Padmasusastra (1898). Both of them were chosen to give a description of how the environmental policy was taken by Sri Mangkunegara as the leader of the Mangkunegaran duchy. Another reason is since in Babad Panambangan, the compilers who are members of Pakempalan, also refer to other references, such as *Babad Tanah Jawi*, *Babad Itih* and other *Babad* created before the authors of *Babad Panambangan* and *Serat Babad Warna-Warni*. The awareness of the compilers of the Babad manuscript to refer to other references shows a good historical awareness that writing needs to get support and comparison from other writings in order not to be trapped in blind subjectivity. Whereas in *Babad Warna-Warni*, there is a statement that Ki Padmasusastra is an independent person who has an interest in *sastra keraton*. Based on this information, researchers assume that the work written by someone who does not have a special bond with the palace or the ruler can be more objective in photographing the conditions and situations reflected in his work. Because there are two powers in the Surakarta region, Mangkunegaran and Kasunanan, the chronicles produced by the Surakarta palace are obligatory as well. Other chapters used in this research are *Babad Kartasura* and *Babad Surakarta*, written by the Kraton poet. R.Ng. Yosodipuro.

Both in the *Babad Panambangan* and in *Babad Warna-Warni*, it is found a few sentences, as well as *pupuh*, which mention political decisions that were influenced by the ecological conditions of the forest. For example, the decision on how Pangeran Adipati Arya Mangkunegara ordered the establishment of a residence

for himself and his family, which layout and building resembled a palace, complete with squares and wards for meetings, in the village of Majarata, after the Pacinan rebellion broke out. Or, in some parts, it is mentioned that several mountains and forests that were used as hiding places by Prince Adipati Arya Mangkunegara when he was chased by Surakarta troops assisted by Dutch troops. In *Serat Babad Warna-warni* (1898) Pangeran Adipati Mangkunegara III was said to hold hunting events, in a forest which is specifically for hunting and tourism location for Javanese nobles and elite Dutch bureaucrats. As a tourism location, the forest was also equipped with lodging facilities and places of stay which are described as being built in the style of Javanese architecture, using the main material of teak wood. From this description, it can be assumed that, the choice of mountain and forest locations as a place to survive, flee and form strength; or as a tourism attraction, is part of policies taken by a ruler using ecosystem considerations, or political-ecology [7].

It is reasonable to presume that the myth that is intentionally formed in addition to the interests of perpetuating power is also able to function as a guardian of natural ecosystems, in this case is the forest. This can be seen from the existence of myths that exist among communities around the forest that are related to the preservation of forest ecosystems and are still trusted until the twentieth century. Some of them are the story of the Wonogiri community that can be said to reflect the people in the Wonogiri Regency. The Wonogiri community in particular believes that various folklores in their area have many values that can be used as a guide for life. Folk stories were originally created to fulfill the wishes of the people who own them. The story is often of a traditional background or living habits of the people in the neighborhood which is the life experience of the people who own it. The existing folklore is absorbed and utilized as a form of the character of the people and their descendants through oral speech [8].

Some folklores with environmental nuances include the story of Raden Ayu Matahati, the story of the origin of the name Wonogiri, and the folklore of Slogohimo. The story of Raden Ayu Matahati takes the background in a village called Sanggrahan is located approximately 500 meters to the south of the Krisak market. It is located at the end of a small hill that stretches west to the Village of Keloran up to Mount Tumbu in the village of Jendi, a row of Gajah Mungkur mountains that limits Selogiri District to Wuryantoro District [8]. The background of the story not only shows how environmental conditions support the choices of action taken by the characters involved in this story, but also shows that the natural environment, such as mountains and forests is an ecology that is inseparable from journey of life that is essential for humans, even for someone who later has a duty as a royal leader.

Another folklore is the origin of the name Wonogiri. The name Wonogiri comes from the words *Wana* and *Giri*, *wana* means forest, *giri* means mountain. Wonogiri can be interpreted as a forest surrounded by mountains or can also be forest and mountain. Logically, this area was formerly used by Raden Mas Said, who set war tactics by guerrilla warfare because of its natural condition that was

not easy for the enemy to find an opponent's hideout. Right on Wednesday Kliwon on May 19, 1741 in the village of Nglaroh Pule village, Raden Mas Said along with his followers made a pledge of a lifetime that is known for the "Sumpah Pamoring Kawula Gusti" that means unification of the leader and his people that can be stand or sit equally and carrying the same weight shouldered. "Tiji Tibeh", *Mati Siji* (one died) *Mati Kabeh* (all died), *Mukti Siji* (one prosperous), *Mukti Kabeh* (all prosperous), meaning that with the determination of their determination they struggle to demand justice and truth, if one dies all die, one be prosperous all be prosperous.

From the story of the origin of the establishment of Wonogiri district, one aspect can be learned, namely naming the Wonogiri region which is believed to consist of two words Wono or Wana which means forest, and Giri which means mountain. From these two words it can be perceived that the region consists of Forest and Mountain areas, two natural potentials that also form regional identities. Awareness of the natural potential and territorial identity enabled Prangwedono as the founder of Mangkunegaran as well as his next successor, to place Wonogiri as a base of defense ecologically, militarily, politically and economically.

Ecologically, the mountainous and forested area of Wonogiri is an area that is not very proper for agriculture or plantations. The people depend on their life for the mercy of nature and forest wealth. Wonogiri land is also not a fertile type of land for rice farming, so that rice is a luxury item that is not available all times. However, the Wonogiri people did not make the absence of rice a big problem. Cassava and dried cassava flour can replace basic needs for rice. The people's choice of cassava as a substitute for rice is not a nonsense thing, because this type of cassava is easier to grow. That is why when there was a problem of food shortages during the forced planting period, the Wonogiri people survived, because they were not affected by the scarcity of rice.

With the existence of mountains and forests surrounding the Wonogiri region, Pangeran Prangwedono succeeded in gathering military power which became known as Punggowo Baku Kawandoso Joyo, or if translated means the forty main forces carrying glory. The character of the military forces that formed in the mountainous and forested regions was clearly different from the military characters formed in the royal fortress. That is why Prangwedono's troops in several superior battles from the Company or Surakarta troops, although the number of troops is relatively smaller.

B. Forests As A Symbol

Forests are symbol of closer discussion in traditional communities, especially Java, and it is not as simple as technical-academic understanding, but more than it, forests for traditional communities in general, *Wana* is an area that has its own sovereignty. This was reflected in several literary works, such as the *Babad Alas Wanamarta* play in the Mahabharata wayang story, or the mention of the location of Padepokan Wanamarta in Serat Centhini, and also the naming of the Wanamarta Forestry Office established by the Mangkunegaran government in 1911.

Myths about forests can also be witnessed in the Suku Temple complex in Karanganyar Regency. In J.Grimmond's study of the Suku Temple complex, he found evidence that the forests and mountains surrounding the conclave were believed by the local community to be sacred and holy places [9]. The temple complex has complete facilities for purification and collection of spiritual energy, and to use it there are certain rituals that must be carried out by followers. The existence of forests and mountains is not just a setting of the location, but also believed to have magical powers. In the temple reliefs there is also a depiction of the warriors who were meditating in the middle of the forest because of the divine command to guard a spring from the disturbance of evil beings. The existence of mountains and forests is also a symbol of the balance of nature and life.

The strong relationship between forests and fauna is also reflected in the relationship between the increasingly reduced population of the Javanese tiger as forest exploitation increases, especially in the regions of Central, East and Madura. The opening of forests in Java for plantation purposes in the middle of the nineteenth century in addition to causing a wave of labor migration from Central Java and Madura which had an impact on increasing population also gave a bad influence on the environment. This causes forest products and a number of faunas to become extinct [10].

In Crawford, it was stated that between tigers and tigers and forests is united by strong friendships, where both provide mutual protection and mutual benefit. This further emphasizes the notion that both are figures who are believed to have permanent charisma and strength [11].

As the exploitation of nature increases, the forest which was originally considered as a sacred, forbidden and magical power, has decreased in its number. However, a number of local beliefs say that the spirit of the forest, or in some places is called *dhanyang*, still continues to accompany the place. Local people believe that they occupy large trees and become the village's safety guard. This belief also causes in some areas, there are still some large trees that are left alive [11].

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that forest is a symbol of traditional community and its sovereignty. In the Mangkunegaran region, forest management contains myths that reflects local wisdom. For example, the way Mangkunegaran's people protect the environment and forests as a symbol of power from the government. The story of the Javanese forest is mostly an oral tradition that contains a mixture of reality, myths and a set of prohibitions recounted from generation to generation repeatedly and agreed upon the truth.

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