

Local Wisdom in the Form of Traditonal Food, Corn in Karo People Tradition

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Abstract—This paper will discuss one of local wisdom in Karo people tradition. Karo people who live in Tanah Karo, North Sumatera is a peasant society. Corn is a biggest crop. There is relation between nature and society. Corn become a local wisdom because besides become a crop, corn is a form of tradition through the using of corn waste as fuel, become food of culture through symbolic meaning. This research is conducted through field research, data is collected through interview and observation in Berastagi village, Tanah Karo. Corn as a natural product is used as tradition form in cooking fuel for traditional food and become local wisdom through traditional food.

Keywords: corn, symbolic meaning, local wisdom, traditional food

I. INTRODUCTION

Karo is an ethnic group in North Sumatra. The Karo people live in Tanah Karo which is a plateau surrounded by mountains with an altitude of 140 to 1400 meters above sea level. Laying on the hillside of the Bukit Barisan, between the mountains to the north is Mount Barus, Pinto, Sibyak, Simole, and Sinabung. On the south, there is Mount Sibuatén. There are two volcanoes in Tanah Karo, there are Sibyak and Sinabung [1]. The identity of the Karo people has distinctive characteristics from the other ethnic groups found in North Sumatra. The characteristics of the Karo people are strongly influenced by the natural environment surrounding it. As a society isolated in the highland interior, the culture which is formed is a culture that is a pattern for its people to connect with the creator, nature and its contents, and especially the relations between the people. The culture in the Karo community which is the identity of the Karo people has four identities including *merga* (clan), language, art, and customs.

The clan is the identity of Karo people. There are five Karo clans which are called in *Bahasa Karo* “*silima merga* namely Ginting, Karo-karo, Perangin-angin, Sembiring and Tarigan. The clan is the most important identity for Karo people. In every introduction in Karo society, the first thing to be asked is the clan/ surname. *Merga* comes from the word *meherga* (expensive). Expensive in Karo culture has a meaning “important”. Karo language is a special language that has a special script. Traditional Karo art are *gendang* and traditional clothes, like *uis gara* and *uis nipés*. The special custom which is identity is customary negotiations namely *runggu* (deliberation and consensus) in the marriage ceremony and other traditional ceremonies, and *rebu* (avoidance to talk with certain relatives).

The Karo people has never been separated from agricultural life. The majority of the Karo people are farmers. Besides agriculture as an activity subsistence economics is

also a profit farming activity. Ethnic Karo is the biggest shareholder in classical agriculture in East Sumatra until North Sumatra. Karo is the largest pepper exporter in the 1800s was followed by tobacco. Karo farmers are tough farmers and exemplary farmers. Formerly, the Karo people planted corn and rice. In the 1940s, a group of Chinese people came to plant vegetables, like *peleng* spinach, chicory, and carrots, to meet the needs of Dutch residents who live in Berastagi. The Chinese cultivating vegetables by renting native land and hire them. There was a transformation of knowledge so that citizens natives understand how to grow vegetables well. Gradually, the people of Karo besides plant corn and rice and then plant vegetables too [2]. Karo people live in Tanah Karo. Tanah Karo is one of regency in North Sumatra. There are 17 sub districts in Tanah Karo, one is Berastagi sub-district. Berastagi sub-district has 10 villages. This research is conducted in Berastagi village which one of a village in Berastagi sub-district.

FIGURE 1. MAP OF KARO REGENCY



Source : <https://www.karokab.go.id/id/profil/peta-daerah>

The reason for choosing this locus is that Berastagi is an agricultural area and the community is a vegetable and fruit farmer. Berastagi is one of corn-producing area. The distance of this sub-district with the district's own administrative center, Kabanjahe, is 10 km, with the provincial capital, Medan, 65 km. Berastagi District is located in a highland area with an altitude of 375 m above sea level with rainfall ranging from 2000-2500 / year and the maximum temperature is 22° centigrade while the minimum temperature is 16° centigrade. This condition makes the Berastagi area very good as an agricultural area. The total area of Berastagi District is 3050 ha, which consists of residential areas, cultivation/rice fields, tourism, public buildings, and others. The cultivation area is mostly planted with fruit trees such as oranges and vegetables, especially cabbage, carrots, spring onions, and others. Rice fields are widely used for planting rice and water vegetables such as watercress, lettuce, leeks and so on that require considerable irrigation so it is suitable to be cultivated in rice

fields. Berastagi is one of the largest agricultural producing areas in Karo with a population of 51,448 people [3].

In general, the main livelihood of the Karo community is farming. This is due to the very fertile agricultural land, which makes Tanah Karo the largest producer of agricultural crops in North Sumatra. Likewise, the Berastagi Sub-district, most of the population of Berastagi sub-district work as farmers, especially for those who live and own agricultural land in rural areas, such as in Doulu Village, Sempa Jaya Village, Rumah Berastagi Village, Raya Village and Guru Singa Village. This happens considering that in the rural areas most of it is still in the form of agricultural lands, so it is very supportive for the residents to cultivate it by planting agricultural crops or farming.

Corn is one of the biggest crops. The abundance of corn waste is a natural resource that can be utilized. Corn waste is plant waste which after being taken by the seeds, the corn waste is generally thrown away, thus increasing the amount of waste. For this reason, it needs to be utilized. Corn waste can be used for a variety of things, namely as animal feed, culinary ingredients, as a substitute for plastic materials, craft materials, burning materials, and as a substitute for gas fuel. Corn waste in the form of straw, cobs, and corncob is a considerable amount of corn crop waste. As much as 20-30% of every 100 kg of corn produced is corn waste. This waste has not been utilized optimally. According to the results of research in Simolap Village, 1 hectare of corn will produce 9 tons, estimated that 1.8-2.7 tons are waste (Tanah Karo Agriculture Service, 2007). Corn waste has not been managed optimally, only a small portion is used as fuel.

The Karo people formerly used corn waste as fuel. People use corn waste as firewood. Now, some people still use corn waste as a fuel to cook traditional food. Due to the abundance of corn waste, the using of corn waste must be improved, because this is more economical and can reduce energy needs such as kerosene and gas. Some villages in Tiga Binanga regard this form of fuel is the most popular in the community. Corn humps are dried first so they are easily burned and produce enough fire to cook in the stove. As a substitute for gas fuel, corn waste can be used as briquettes for cooking, like in Simolap village, Tiga Binanga Sub-district. Karo people still use the corn waste to cook traditional food, one of the informants said that she uses corn waste to cook *arsik fish*, and *lemang*. At her house, there were sacks of corn cobs, and the candlenut skin. She said that she cooks *arsik fish* with a mixture of wood, corn cobs and candlenut skin to make the food better. She did not use LPG because she felt that the traditional way had become her habit and she did not want to replace it. The use of corn waste as fuel be a tradition in society.

FIGURE 2. CORN WASTE IS USED TO COOK TRADITIONAL FOOD, ARSIK FISH



FIGURE 3. A MOTHER WITH HER DAUGHTER IN CORNFIELD



Corn becomes a culture in Karo people because corn all can be used. Corn seed can be used to make corn flour, there is a Karo traditional food which is called *cipera*, and it is made of cornflour. There is another traditional food namely *Jong Labar*. *Jong Labar* is a typical traditional food, *jong* is Karo language which means corn. *Jong Labar* is made from a mixture of fine flour and young corn which are given pepper and salt and then wrapped with banana leaves and steamed until cooked. These traditional foods become a culture and the existence of this traditional food cannot be separated from corn.

FIGURE 4. MASAK CIPERA



FIGURE 5. JONG LABAR



II. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive method and a case study with an ethnographic study approach. Qualitative research methods are carried out in natural settings and the data collected is qualitative. Qualitative methods are based more on phenomenological philosophy that prioritizes appreciation. Qualitative methods seek to understand and interpret the meaning of an event in human behavior interactions in certain situations [4]. According to Yin, case studies are used extensively in social science research, both in traditional disciplines (psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology). Case studies are also used as research methods to complement qualitative descriptive methods. In this study, researchers used an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic studies describe and interpret culture, social groups or systems [5]. In this study, data collection was carried out by in-depth interviews. In this interview, the author obtained a cultural view and identified the actions and understanding of Karo people in Berastagi village in the practice of the use of corn, both corn waste and the corn which is very abundant in Tanah Karo. The research is conducted both at home and in cornfields. Informants are corn farmers and also people who use corn both as cooking fuel, and corn as a traditional food ingredient.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tradition is defined as a habit derived. Tradition according to Hobsbawm is a set of traditional practices that are created, usually governed by rules either openly or secretly received from ritual or symbolic which try to instill certain values and norms of behavior that are automatically continuous with the past [6]. Hobsbawm distinguishes tradition between the original and found based on historical evidence, which continues to be practiced over time so that the practice of the tradition can be observed empirically and historically. In short, Hobsbawm's definition of tradition is that indigenous traditions have historical sources from a long time ago and their continuity is visible. The tradition according to Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin in their 1984 article "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious" offers a more relativist approach to tradition, which treats tradition as a contemporary symbolic construction carried out by society in the present [7]. They see tradition not as something genuine or fake. Handler and Linnekin maintain that these social phenomena are not outside our interpretation, tradition is better seen as a process that involves continual re-creation. The constructivist conception of tradition considers the practice of having cultural or ancient sources as important as pragmatic actions with symbolic relationships. The tradition according to this theory is a modern construction compared to something that was passed on from the preceding generation.

All traditions with an approach built, constructed tend to treat all traditions as something contemporary and not from history, and tradition as symbolic construction. With this theory, the meaning of tradition tends to be vague, historical references only become a means to search for symbolic meanings implied by tradition not to see it as a tradition from time to time. Tradition has an important role as a normative function that serves to distinguish groups and also unite social groups and individuals within them. Tradition is also often used to designate objects and practices handed down from

generation to generation, which have special meaning in terms of culture and identity. The true tradition must be seen to have something to do with local, national, and global influences. The sustainability of an ethnic group rests in part on the ability of people to track themselves back to the same origin that lies in a real-time period, creates history, and can be passed down from generation to generation to continue the existence of culture. In discussing culture one perspective is to view culture as a system of meanings and symbols that are shared. This approach was pioneered by two of the most prominent anthropologists, Clifford Geertz, and David Schneider. Symbols and meanings shared by members of society, lie between them, not within themselves. Symbols and meanings are general (public), and not private. Anthropology attempts to interpret these meanings and interpretation must be developed into a thick description that must be deeply embedded into the richness of the context of social life.

Geertz takes the meaning of shared property as a basis. The meaning is not mysterious, he is real, is in everyday life. Geertz agrees that culture lies in time and place through the temporal and spatial distribution of individuals who have it. Culture also lies between the thoughts of individuals, not in them. Cultural symbols as something shared and public (as something that is in social interaction) give birth to diversity and hidden cultural changes. Some diversity in the individual version of public culture may not only be a social imperfection but maybe an adaptive need.

Anthropology studies human phenomena, not only human minds, evolutionary bodies, origin, tools, art, or groups, but as parts or aspects of general patterns, or whole. To emphasize this fact and make it part of human continuation efforts, anthropologists have used the word culture to refer to the overall concept. Thus, culture has become a way of talking about humans, and about specific human examples when viewed from a certain perspective. Of course, the word culture has other connotations too, and important ambiguity. In general, the concept of culture has become highly related to anthropological thought, anthropologists as someone who uses the word "culture" as usual, or through "conversion experience," using the word culture with hope, or even with faith.

The term "culture," also in its broadest sense, tries to bring human action and meaning down to the most basic level of significance, to examine it universally to understand them. When we talk about people who belong to different cultures, then, we refer to the types of very basic differences between them, showing that there are special variations of human phenomena [8]. Wagner said that every culture can be understood as a special manifestation, or an example of a human phenomenon, this assumption is called "cultural relativity." The combination of the two implications of cultural ideas is the fact that we, ourselves belong to culture (relative objectivity), and that we must consider all cultures to be equal (cultural relativity), leading to general propositions regarding the study of culture. Culture "in this sense attracts the same sign that is not seen between" who knows "(who comes to know himself) and" who is known "(which is the observer community).

Food is not only the source of nutrition for human but also plays various roles in our daily life, beliefs, and socioeconomics. Food has many symbolic meanings; it not

only expresses but also establishes the relationship between people and their environment as well as between people and what they believe. Therefore, food is an important component of society. Food consumed by one person alone is not a social food. However, when it is consumed by a group of people together or eaten in a traditional ceremony, the sociality of food is identified. In human society, food is a means for people to establish and express relationships between one another. This relationship can exist among individuals, community members, religious groups, and ethnic groups.

In anthropology eating habits are something very complex because it involves about the way of cooking, likes and dislikes, and the variety of belief (religion), taboos and perceptions mythic (superstition) related to the category of eating: food production, preparation, and consumption [9]. Based on that concept, food is a cultural concept, a statement that is in the community about foods that are edible, and which is considered not to be eaten and it is not as food [10]. According to Sony Keraf, traditional (local) wisdom is a form of knowledge, belief, understanding or insight, and customs or human ethics who guide human behavior in life in the ecological community. Ethics means "habit" or "behavior", which can be defined as good-living, good habit, whether in person or in a group. This good habit is implemented and becomes a legacy from generation to generation [11].

Basically, local or traditional wisdom is the part of the ethics or morality that can help the human beings to answer what kinds of morality that they should do, how they should do, especially in managing the environment and resources. This good habit then is changed into rules, norm, that is delivered, understood, known, and reachable in the community. Therefore, ethics can be understood as the rules on how a person being must living well as human being and ethics must be understood as the knowledge on what is good or bad of human habit. The meaning of local wisdom (tradition) is all the knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and habits and ethics that guide human behavior in their life within the ecological community. Where wisdom is understood as a person's ability to use his mind in acting or acting as a result of an evaluation of something, an object, or an event that occurs. As a term, wisdom is often interpreted as wisdom. Local specifically refers to limited interaction space with a limited value system. As an interaction space that has been designed in such a way that involves a pattern of relationships between humans and humans or humans with their physical environment. That local wisdom was implemented in every physics or non-physics activity (environment, facility, prayers, sacrificial things, incense, etc.), routinely or accidental, therefore such of those can prevent the environmental damage.

Local wisdom aims to control human nature whose needs and desires are unlimited. Local wisdom greatly influences the sustainability of the human environment as a place to live. Local wisdom is a life value system inherited from one generation to the next in the form of religion, culture or customs which are generally in oral form in the form of a society's social system. The existence of local wisdom in the community is the result of the process of adaptation to declining in a very long period towards an environment that is usually inhabited or an environment where frequent interaction occurs. According to Ridwan, local wisdom can be understood as a human effort by using his mind (cognition) to

act and behave towards something, object, or event that occurs in a space [12]. Local wisdom is a social value and has the function as the principle, control, and rules/mores for defining the habit in maintaining nature sources. Local wisdom is important to be understood and implemented in a community in order to keep the environmental balance and preserve it as well [13]. According to the summary from Social Department/Department Social, (now Ministry of Social Affairs), local wisdom can be defined as the point of view and knowledge and living strategy in the shape of the people's activity in overcoming their problem [14].

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The occurrence of the Mount Sinabung eruption had a very large impact on the condition of the people in Tanah Karo. Corn which is the largest yield of the Karo community often results in crop failures. Berastagi Subdistrict is safer from the eruption but also affected by its volcanic dust. Some people of Berastagi Village used corn waste mixed with firewood for cooking traditional food. Culturally and in the history of Karo, people used firewood for cooking because it was believed by many people that cooking using firewood, the cuisine will taste more delicious. The traditional Karo cuisine, such as *tasak telu*, and *cipera* is cooked using firewood mixed with corn waste. One of the older informants who sells the traditional food in the market said, she is cooking *arsik fish*, *lemang* as a traditional food using the corn waste mixed with firewood. At her house, there were sacks of corn cobs and the candlenut skin. She said that she cooked *arsik fish* with a mixture of wood, corn cobs, and candlenut skin to make the food better. She did not use LPG because she felt that the traditional way had become her habit and she did not want to replace it. According to another female informant said, the corn cobs have been used by the Karo people to iron the clothes. The cobs become important to meet their daily needs. People must iron quickly using the heat from the corn cobs because it can not only damage the clothes but also decrease its heat. The use of corn cobs for ironing remained until the 1980s. The informant told the use of corn cobs as an iron tool based on her experience.

All the traditional food which contain corn as the main ingredient such as *Cipera*, *Jong Labar* has a cultural meaning. Food has cultural meaning if it served in traditional ceremony. and used as a character of one group, divided by regions, families, races or religions. In Karo society, there is a ceremony namely *kerja tahun/ merdang merdem*. Every place has a different time to celebrate *kerja tahun*. In Berastagi, it celebrates every October. This ceremony is a celebration ceremony which was held after the planting of rice in the fields. In every ceremony such as *kerja tahun*, people reunion serves traditional food such as *cipera* and *jong labar*. *Cipera* is a typical Karo dish made from slices of chicken with the thick sauce. In addition to the main ingredients in the form of free-range chicken and corn flour. *Cipera* also has other ingredients, such as mushroom, and other kitchen spices, in the form of lemongrass, tamarind, tomatoes, chili, celery leaves, shallots and so on. Commonly used chicken parts include the neck, wings, legs, liver and chicken gizzard. In making *cipera* sauce, corn flour is used to make it thick. *Cipera* has a symbolic meaning for the Karo people. Pieces of free-range chicken, including the neck, wings, legs, and gizzard are considered a symbol of the unity of family

relationships that are united and difficult to separate and will be forever happy.

Jong Labar which has a sweet taste has a symbolic meaning. Karo people make this snack for events that made sweet memories, such as marriage or thanksgiving for occupying a new home. The Karo tradition provides *Jong Labar* as a sweet dish made with an outpouring of sincerity so that one day it will receive sweet (good) replies from others. In Karo culture serving sweet dishes is a good faith to establish a close relationship and share the goodness. Corn besides becoming the main ingredient in traditional food can be used as a cooking fuel for traditional food. These all show that corn in Karo people life has an important cultural meaning and become a pearl of local wisdom through the symbolic meaning which is contained in traditional food. This traditional food is served when there is a traditional ceremony.

FIGURE 6 KARO TRADITIONAL KITCHEN, PUT CORN BESIDE THE KITCHEN SYMBOLIZE CORN AS SOMETHING MOST IMPORTANT IN KARO PEOPLE AND SYMBOLIZE THE CONTINUITY OF KARO PEOPLE'S LIFE.



V. CONCLUSIONS

Owing to its function to express the central position in the representation and relationship, a portion of traditional food can be used as a symbol of the important events in Karo society such as *kerja tahun*, and traditional ceremony. The symbolic significance of food eaten is more important than the nutritional value; for example, the consumption of these foods can determine and reestablish the relationship between man and God, and between people. Karo people eat special food to celebrate important events or ceremonies. In Karo culture, foods have been used as symbols of meaning such as sweet taste become a symbol of sweet memory, a whole part of chicken symbol happiness. The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is, people in Berastagi still use corn cobs as

firewood to cook traditional food. This is more economical and can reduce the use of kerosene and gas, it is perceived impractical by some Karo people. Despite that, there are people who use corn waste as fuel because they have certain purposes such as selling traditional food. Corn cobs are dried first so they will be easily burned and produce enough fire to cook in the stove. Sometimes it is added with wood, candlenut, and used rubber flip-flops to increase the fire. Corn also a symbolic meaning through its meaning in traditional food. The Karo people in understanding their culture are known to be very strong in maintaining their cultural traditions and it can be seen from the use of corn. Corn is the main thing in Karo culture and society.

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