

Tepung Tawar as a Moral Symbol in Malay Community of North Sumatera, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Tepung Tawar ceremony was one of traditional folklore of Malay community in North Sumatera, Indonesia. It was often carried out in several regencies and cities such as Medan, Langkat, Deli Serdang, Serdang Bedagai, Asahan, Batu Bara, and Labuhan Batu. It was carried out at many traditional ceremonies or occasions: not only at wedding ceremony but also at hajj pilgrimage departure, completion of the Quran recitation, opening a new land, ascending a new house, children going down to the ground, assuming a new position in office, and so on. As a part of North Sumatran Malay's culture and identity, *Tepung Tawar* was believed to be able to strengthen their kinship. Javanese who have assimilated with the Malay in Medan also participated in *Tepung Tawar* ceremony. This paper examined the meaning and beliefs behind the ceremony. It used descriptive qualitative method using data collected from various media, both printed and electronic, as well as interviews with several informants in Labuhan Deli, Medan. The results of the study showed that *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was loaded with moral values such as peace, sincerity, and gratitude to God.

Keywords: *Tepung Tawar, Culture, Symbol, Folklore, Malay*

1. INTRODUCTION

With territory stretching from Sabang in the West to Merauke in the East, Indonesia has thousands of islands. Its population was extremely diverse, consisted in hundreds of tribes, cultures, and traditions. They were unevenly spread across Indonesia's 34 provinces, one of which was North Sumatra Province. North Sumatra Province, with the capital city of Medan, has an area of 72,981.23 km² and a population of 14.26 million people. Its population composed of multi-ethnic communities, including Malay, Batak, Javanese, and Nias. Based on the 2015 census, the majority of its population was Muslims (63.91%), followed by Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, and *Parmalim* Christians. Muslims of North Sumatra, especially those belong to Malay community, has a traditional folklore, called *Tepung Tawar* ceremony—one of Malay folklores [1].

G.W. Boswel defines folklore "as the unwritten history of ancient societies preserved in the minds of the people and handed down through ages by the medium of language or practice." A. Taylor, an eminent American folklorist, has succeeded to great extent in defining the term folklore. His definition, according to Mazharul Islam, is the only one which seems more rational than all others definition:

"folklore is the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. It may be folk songs, folk tales, riddles, proverbs or other materials preserved in words, it may be traditional tools and physical objects like fences or knots, hot cross buns, or Easter eggs; traditional ornamentation like the walls of Troy; or traditional symbols like the Swastika. It may be traditional procedures like throwing salt over one's shoulder or knocking on wood. It may be traditional beliefs like the notion that elder is good for the ailments of the eye. All of these are folklore" [2].

In North Sumatra, the *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was not only carried out by Malay people, but also by some Javanese and Batak, especially those who have lived in North Sumatra for a long time. Therefore, if we agree that folklore is something that is informally studied, knowledge of the world that is not official, then it is important to discuss this Malay folklore. It can help us to understand the Malay people of North Sumatra. In this study we ask, why did they do the tradition of the *Tepung Tawar* ceremony at every event until now?

2. METHOD

The study used descriptive qualitative method. The approach tries to understand and interpret the meaning of

an event in human interactions in certain situations. The subject of this study was described based on the results of the data collection and in accordance with the research question. The data was collected through literature studies, observations, and interviews. Observations were made from the time the author lived in Medan and attended college in there. The interviews was conducted in October 2018. The key informants consisted of people who lived in Labuhan Deli and its surroundings, especially respected elders in the village who were around 30 to 60 years old. In addition, the authors randomly interviewed several communities, including lecturers, traders in traditional markets, and drivers who lived in North Sumatra. The data analysis was conducted using the theory of symbols, values, and socio-cultural norms.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Symbol

Symbols are a term in logic, mathematics, semantics, semiotics, and epistemology. Symbols are mixing, comparing, and making analogies between signs and objects it refers. Symbol is arbitrary—there is no natural relationship between the marked and the marker. The meaning of the sign is determined by community conventions [3].

In human life, symbols are always around. Society creates new symbols all the time. A symbol is anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by the people of a shared culture. A word, a whistle, a wall of graffiti, a flashing red light, a raised fist, all serve as symbols. The human capacity to create and manipulate symbols is reflected in various meanings associated with the same symbol; e.g. the simple act of winking can convey interest, understanding, or even insult [4].

People use symbols as a means of perceiving the elementary image of the world. The language is capable of constantly interpreting signs and qualities of objects and phenomena and the multiple connections between them. In the learning of the real world through language, symbols are an especially important cognitive mechanism. By providing symbolic information about the views of the language speaker, about the real ethnic world, the cultural field, and living conditions, symbols help update the old elements of ethnic cognitive concepts, and help develop external unity of the linguistic and non-linguistic image of the world [5].

Symbols can also show the diverse social identities. As expressed by Umberto Eco in *Nawiroh Vera*, humans can communicate through various mediums. For example, through actions, humans can communicate their identity, social class, and culture [6].

3.2. Cultural Value

Culture is not only tied to the local and unique, it is also a property of our humanity and as such expected to assume some culturally universal characteristics across communities, codes, and users [7]. Value, as a judgment

on the good or the bad of something, is also bound to culture—it is socially, not biologically, constructed and inherited from generation to generation. Concepts of value that live in people's minds form a system of cultural values serving as the highest guideline for human behavior. More concrete levels of behavior systems, such as special rules, laws, and norms, are guided by the system of cultural values. The system is so pervasive, so that it is difficult to replace a system of cultural values with another one in a matter of short time.

Aziza stated that culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people; for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs [8]. According to Koentjaraningrat, the cultural values are the most abstract level of norm. A system of cultural values consists of conceptions, living in the minds of most members of a society, regarding things that they should consider very valuable in their lives [9], [10].

The abovementioned conception of culture can be derived into a concept of national identity which distinguishes a country from the others. Culture is a system of conceptions inherited in symbolic form, enabling humans to communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life. Taylor, as cited by Nuraeni and Gustini, suggested that culture is a complex whole, contained in it knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, customs and other abilities and habits acquired by humans as members of a society [11].

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. History of *Tepung Tawar*

Tepung Tawar has been passed through generations for a long time. The North Sumatra Malay community adopted it from Hindu tradition before Islam entered the archipelago. Our informants reported that when Muslim merchants from Gujarat and the Indian Hadramaut at the 7th century, they saw the presence of animism (beliefs in spirit life) and dynamism (beliefs in the supernatural powers of objects) in society. The North Sumatra Malay community has been observing *Tepung Tawar* ceremony ever since.

The same tradition can be observed among Indian Hindus or Hindu community of North Sumatra during their religious ceremonies. Hindu Indians or Tamils were domiciled in the North Sumatra region until recently. The Hindu community of North Sumatra originally came from South India. Their predecessors were brought in to North Sumatra by the British colonial government to work on plantations, such as tobacco, rubber, and oil palm plantations. In Medan, there was an area called Kampung Keling which was inhabited mostly by Indians. They had

black skin and were known as Tamils or Keling people (*keling* means black).

Folklore of *Tepung Tawar* was also found among Dayak people in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan. They called it *Tampung Tawar*. As for Banjar people of South Kalimantan, the similar folklore was known as *Batapung Tawar*. Among Acehnese, *Tepung Tawar* tradition was called *Peusijeuk*, which literally means “to cool”. Like the *Tepung Tawar* of the North Sumatra Malay, Aceh’s *Peusijeuk* also influenced by Hindu culture brought by Indian traders and migrants and was often performed on almost all Acehnese customary activities, including marriage. The *Peusijeuk* was usually carried out to invoke salvation, peace, and happiness in life, and also attended by religious leaders because it was considered sacred.

4.1.2. *Tepung Tawar* Ingredients

Tepung Tawar ingredients consists of *setaman* flowers, yellow rice, *sidingin-dingin* leaves, water, rice flour, and *gorai*. Every ingredient has its own meaning. *Setaman* flowers were various fragrant flowers that were easily found at a common garden. Yellow rice means rich, noble, and wise in the future. *Sidingin-dingin* leaves means safety in life. Water means health. Rice flour means purity and avoiding jealousy, envy, hardship, greed, revenge, or other resentments. *Gorai* means food sufficiency.

According to an informant in Labuhan Deli, Medan Labuhan, who has been living in the area for a long time, the abovementioned ingredients of *Tepung Tawar* must be completed so that the *Tepung Tawar* ceremony can be carried out perfectly, both for those who received it and who gave it.

4.1.3. Tutorial of the *Tepung Tawar*

As a part of wedding procession, the *Tepung Tawar* ceremony needs to be carried out according to several stages.

First, the yellow rice was sprinkled over the head, to the right and left shoulder of the bride as a gesture of congratulating and hoping for joy. The yellow rice symbolized the Sultan and greatness of Malay. It was carried out while reciting *shalawat* to the Prophet Muhammad SAW once.

Second, the *sidingin-dingin* leaves was dipped in the water and sprinkled on the forehead, both shoulders, and the back of the hands. Applying it to the forehead means to think before acting, to the right and left shoulders means to be responsible, to the back of the right and left hand (with the position of the bride and groom’s hands face down) means working hard for livelihoods.

Third, the egg was rubbed to the bride’s face (it was put for a moment on the bride’s lips and rotated around the face, then returned to its place). It was meant to be a prayer for posterity and a full-of-love family (*sakinah mawaddah warrahmah*).

Fourth, *henna* was applied to the bride’s right and left palm, followed by a prayer asking for blessing from Allah. The ritual was usually conducted by three, five, or seven

people (in an odd number). An odd number was in accordance with the Islamic belief that Allah likes things that are in odd numbers.

4.2. Discussion

Malay community of North Sumatra believed that practicing *Tepung Tawar* ceremony involves supernatural powers, although most of which are difficult to proved by reason. For example, an informant had just passed the undergraduate examination, so his family decided to hold a *Tepung Tawar* ceremony to celebrate. The ceremony was a must for them and should not be abandoned. It was held to express their gratitude to God who helped the accomplishment of his study in university. Furthermore, *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was thought to motivate him to keep up the good progress of carrying out his duty and his future carrier. At the event, *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was accompanied by prayer to God.

The same ceremony was held for new regional leaders who were elected or assigned to the public offices in North Sumatra. They would be greeted with a *Tepung Tawar* ceremony which was closed with prayer. The purpose was similar, namely as healing and a hope for health and convenience in carrying out the tasks. This ceremony was held not only for regional leaders from Malay ethnic but also from other ethnic groups.

Based on observations and interviews, it was understood that for Malay community cultural values were of the highest level and abstract form of customs. They considered it as valuable and important so that it can be used as a guide that gives direction and orientation in living their life. However, since the Malay identity was constructed mostly as Muslims, they would also prioritize Islamic teachings from the Qur’an and Hadist as the supreme guide of life.

The *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was only one of the manifestations of the value system that is difficult to be explained rationally. However, precisely because of its nature, the cultural values resided at the emotional level.

The author argues that *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was a manifestation of the dominant values in the Malay society of North Sumatra. The system of cultural values itself served as a structure to meet various human needs. It was born from the intercourse of various cultures. Each individual, as a member of the community, in carrying out his social activities was always guided by the value system that lived in the society. It means that cultural values greatly affect human actions and behavior, both individually, in groups or society as a whole.

The *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was also held for other occasions such as the departure for hajj, the finishing of Qur’an recital (*khatam Al Quran*), opening new land, learning martial arts for children, descending seeds, giving name for children, assuming public office, and so on. It means the *Tepung Tawar* was not only held in traditional events, but also has been national public occasions. The “authentic” *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was only found among Malay ethnic, despite other ethnics in North Sumatra having traditional ceremony similar to the *Tepung Tawar*. While the Malays tend to provide moral teachings through symbols, other ethnics prefer the use of

spoken language. Batak Mandailing, for an instance, tends to provide teachings and advices through spoken language with the *markobar* term which takes time up to half a day.

As mentioned above, the *Tepung Tawar* must be given by three, five, or seven people. In other words, it required an odd number of people. The odd number had an important meaning for Malay community, considering they were predominantly Muslim. The odd number was appropriate or in harmony with the Islamic teachings. So, it also means that Malay people uphold Islamic values.

As for the social values in *Tepung Tawar* ceremony, it can be seen from those who gave the *Tepung Tawar*. They were not only the family of the recipient, but also his/her close friends. In a wedding ceremony, they were expected to pray for the bride and the groom to live long, successfully and happily. It was apparent, than, that the social values was upheld in *Tepung Tawar* ceremony. *Tepung Tawar* ceremony cannot be carried out without the support of families, close friends, and neighbors. It indicated that someone cannot live alone without the others.

5. CONCLUSION

Tepung Tawar ceremony was one of important cultural practices of the North Sumatra Malay community. The purpose of the ceremony was basically to show gratitude to Allah, the God Almighty, for his generous provisions. It was accompanied by *shalawat*, *marhaban*, and closed with the recitation of prayer to Allah so that His blessings would be given to all who were present. However, *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was not an obligatory ritual because it was unknown in Islam. It was just a tradition, customs, or culture. The *Tepung Tawar* ceremony was one of the cultural heritages of the Malay community of North Sumatra that needed to be preserved.

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