

“The Ethnography Gayo Coffee Farmers During COVID-19 Pandemic Era”

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to explain the dynamics within the life of Gayo coffee farmers during COVID-19 pandemic that is currently happening globally. We argued that these farmers are experiencing dilemmatic conditions during COVID-19 pandemic. However, coffee farmers in Gayo have the choices that they can take to survive with the hopes that COVID-19 will soon be over. With several challenges and obstacles on their main livelihood, they develop varieties of income sources and survive with their current moral and economic ethics.

Keywords: *Coffee Farmers, Covid-19, Ethnography, Culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

This several months of COVID-19 pandemic has been creating anxieties for both urban and rural citizens due to its spread. This pandemic era forcibly stopped all development systems so that most people would have to stay at home and resume their activities at home. According to [1] the spread of COVID-19 is a phenomenon that truly shocked the world, where the cases of death are continuously increasing and currently touch the number of seven thousand. This pandemic created anxiety especially among children and the elderly. The impact of this pandemic is social distancing that citizens have to do during their daily activities.

This issue heavily impacts several sectors, not only the health sectors. Pandemi also created a serious impact on the global economy. Since the economy development in Indonesia as an agrarian country relies on most of their citizens as farmers. This includes farmers' livelihoods in Gayo, where their household income is heavily dependable on the consumers' request and the price in the world's market which would help the farmers' economical system.

The decline of prices in the world's market weakened farmers' economic system. Farmers' position as producers and consumers are impacted differently than workers and other groups, since farmers need large

amounts of capital even with the decline of prices due to lower amounts of buyers and consumers. Hence the problems with export and import for farmers in Indonesia.

[2] said that the effect of exports, imports, and investment in the farming sector in Indonesia heavily impacts the development of people's economy. [3] also stated that the economic connection between countries as an important factor in economic development, which is in-line with international trading theories, that if there are larger amounts of imported goods and services, which then then lower the country's productivity and the lower the country's economic growth. However according to [4] during this pandemic, there has been a change with negative impact on the needs and necessities of farmers which oriented on the lower requests from consumers. The roles of coffee farmers as trading communities which are heralded as source of income and job providers for rural citizens also impacted.

Different than what previous writers have discussed about the dependency phenomenon on export sector that has negative impact on the farmers' income has a negative sentiment due to the lower requests from the market due to COVID-19, these stories that are created with ethnographic way will create a teaching description on the importance for farmers to have a variety of works

in the farming world, where when a commodity is in shambles then it will be helped with other commodities.

2. METHOD

In this research, we used ethnography methods as an approach to obtain data in the field during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Data-gathering process was done in September-October 2020, writer used participatory observation, in-depth interview and survey to obtain the condition and socio-economic aspect of Gayo coffee farmers and its relation to COVID-19 pandemic.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The stories of Three Gayo Coffee Farmers During COVID-19 Pandemic¹

3.1.1. Farmer Families in Dusun cemara, Batarsari Village Mbah Epi

Mbah Epi is one of the farmer in Batarsari Village, Dusun Cemara. As a farmer, mbah Epi lived her days on the farm. Crops have been cultivated by her, many in an intercropping way². They are corn, coffee and potato.

Mbah Epi has three children, two boys and a girl. The daughter lives next door to mbah Epi, whereas one of the son love in Pena village, and the other one is looking for jobs in Jakarta. Mbak Maliah is the name of the daughter. Hier daily activity is also as a farmer. She cultivated pumpkins, coffees and avocados. To her as a small-time farmer, plant cultivation doesn't need a big capital, for her seeds and maintenance, unlike potatoes and or tomatoes that need bigger production capital for maximum results. It can reach more than 10 million rupiahs, even, for one-time planting. Even though during harvest, the profit reaped will be equal to the initial capital. However it won't be a choice due to the risk if the planting is failed or the harvest is low.

Mbah Epi, other than her job as a farmer, also nurtures two goats and several chickens and also sells daily needs in his little shop. She does this to fulfill her needs and to keep her harvest in case of emergency. Other than that, since mbah Epi is a farmer who is used to work and trade and is a hard worker, she also works on the farm alone and also gathers grasses for her goats meal. Mbah Epi is a widow, because of that, even though she has adult children who can provide for her, it does not make her expect her children would provide for her. She remains head of the household for her grandchildren who live with her.

¹ Informant names and places are being obscured following the ethics of ethnographic writing. See Atkison, Paul (etc.). (ed). 2007. *Handbook of Ethnography*. Sage Publication. London. Hal 339.

² Among Gayo citizens there is the term '*peger ni keben*' which is a local wisdom among them in relation to alternative plants to their main ones.

Everything that she does is to fulfill a sense of safety on her needs where no one knows what would happen. As long as she can farm and work, Mbah Epi would remain in her farm and to trade.

Bu Maliah

As I said before, Ibu Maliah is Mbah Epi's daughter who lives next-door. Ibu Maliah is a housewife with two boys. She is also a farmer who plants pumpkins, coffees and leeks.

In her daily life, Ibu Maliah works as a farmer, which she's done to fulfill her daily needs. She also opens a small store with her mother, Since they do not harvest every day, then her periodically-harvested products are being kept as a capital for the next planting season, other than to fulfill her daily needs. The vegetables in her own garden are pumpkins, cabbages, and other root vegetables.

Bu Maliah does not take care of her field alone, her husband and adult child are a source of labor in her family. Even though her field is not too wide, only 0,5 Ha. And they are only planted with plants that can be harvested all-year such as various vegetables than can be planted in between coffee farm. The effort to increase productivity is not yet an option since she has no capital to expand her land yet. And also considering the risk she has to take with large capital, if she then would experience loss, it would not be such a bother. Other than her not-so-big field, as a woman, she does not receive other inheritance from her family. However, with several vegetable plants in between her coffee farm then her family can minimize

The family does not have big enough land to take care of with enough labor is its own dilemma. If they have to rent a field then of course they have to plant plants with big enough profit, such as chillies, tomatoes, potatoes or corn. But to them it is not a solution. To them, labor is not enough to support their lives. They also need bigger land, and also capital and labor. Then as a farmer with rationality towards their economic reality, ibu Maliah's family is willing to do whatever it takes to avoid themselves from subsisten conditions.

Pak Anwar

One day in a house that we live in. ibu Maliah's brother or mbah Epi's son comes in. An easy-going adult who is married and has been blessed with two children and an established life. As told by ibu Maliah, he had just bought an Avanza car and a new Vixion motorcycle with cash after chilli, avocado and coffee harvest. We can summarize from that that her brother Anwar, or usually called Wan is one of the farmers with a prosperous life. He can afford to buy the goods that represent himself as a successful person.

Pak Anwar does not live in Dusun Cemara, but he lives in a neighboring village called Desa Pena, in Dusun Sarange. Bu Maliah said that her younger brother has sufficient knowledge about agriculture and plantations. And it is true, he really knows and masters the field he is in due to years of farming experience. He

really understands how to do farming properly, starting from adaptation to nature and climate and calculating profit and loss issues, as well as the use of technology to support his work. His experience and knowledge in farming is supported by his interactions with various actors who are also colleagues whose educational background is agriculture. And also he is one of the partners of one of the largest food companies in Indonesia that requires raw materials for the manufacture of their products.

He has a large area of land, so he can grow a variety of vegetables, fruits and of course coffee as one of the superior commodities which is the source of his household income. Even some of the plants he planted required a lot of capital. Therefore, in the process of maintaining and planting, if the technology he uses is not supportive, then he will use labor or wage labor who do not have much land and have free time. Usually the labor wage for women is Rp. 50,000 and Rp. Male laborers. 75,000 per day and have been given food, drink and cigarettes with working hours from 7 to 2 in the afternoon.

He usually gets coffee seeds by buying from one of the cooperatives in Takengen so he can get superior coffee varieties, both Gayo 1 (Timtim) and Gayo 2, various kinds of seeds needed by farmers are usually purchased, because he said to make his own seeds, he is actually capable, but the quality will not be good and the quality will not support its growth and development.

After the seeds are purchased from the cooperative, the next process he does is sowing the seeds by himself. Then when the planting season came, he employed several other workers where these workers did not have other jobs after finishing working on his small land. In fact, he also only employed laborers when he was unable to do it himself. And he only employs laborers with the calculation he has made that it will not increase the production costs and affect the profits he will get.

He owns a very huge and vast land. So he said that because the land I have is large and I can't cultivate it all and he doesn't rent it out to other people, and also because of a labor shortage because his laborers are only part-time workers, so after they work on his land, these workers will work in others's lands. So there are some of his lands that have not been properly cultivated.

Apart from being a farmer who owns a vast land, he is also a working partner of a coffee exporting company. The contract that is signed by Pak Wan with the company is one option that must be taken by him and several other farmers. This is because for Pak Wan and other farmers in general, the option of signing a contract with certain parties known as warehouse receipts is an effort to protect and guarantee coffee prices when they are not at normal price conditions. The cooperation that exists between farmers and cooperatives is cooperation that is symbiotic mutualism. One of the efforts is to provide warehouse receipts as price guarantees, where coffee production from farmers will be purchased regardless of the amount.

The patterns of cooperation carried out by farmers and cooperatives and companies that require production from farmers are a pattern of cooperation that requires farmers to do so. Although not all farmers are interested in this kind of cooperation. However, for Pak Wan alone who is a farmer with farming experience and has a fine economic rationality, this cooperation is a logical choice. Pak Wan said that he did this because he helped farmers in terms of price protection and social insurance for various other purposes. Therefore, farmers are safe and their economic level is getting better.

Coffee farmers in the past three years seem to have progressed in the sales aspect. Average log prices reach 10,000 -12,500 / Bamboo. So that it is immortalized in a song by one of the Gayo singers whose lyrics are more or less like this:

*"Kupi Gayo bermartabat, hasil rakyat ari rebe".
"ekonomi maju pesat, makin semangat ke murege".*

The song can still be heard playing frequently, turns out, the condition had been flipping out since the pandemic hit Indonesia in March. Initially, the price of coffee fell 25 percent from the previous price. At that time, there was still a month left of coffee harvest time. Despite the pandemic, at least the Gayo people can still survive. However, as the harvest period is over, the coffee is getting less and of course the quality is getting worse. This usually occurs at the beginning of the harvest season and the fruit at the end of the main harvest season. If the price drops it is also common for the quality of the coffee to be like this. But unfortunately during this pandemic the price of coffee has decreased even though the quality is still as good as before. During the harvest season in September the price of coffee fell by 50 percent.

This is what Pak Budi and his family feel. Pak Budi owns 1 hectare of land. He must pay labors to harvest the coffee at a price of 55,000 / can. Not to mention the cost he needs to pay labor to pick the coffee, he needs to spend 25,000 / can. If he paid his coffee picker labors less, people will be reluctant to pick coffee in their gardens. If nobody helps him to harvest in his gardens during this harvest season and there is high rainfall, the coffee will ripen and rot quickly. And if the beans fell to the ground, Pak Budi would have lost even more. Because if the coffee is rotten, the skin color will be blackish red. It's hard to spot if it's under a fallen coffee leaf. And the beans will become worthless. If he doesn't get any help from coffee pickers that's what would happen. Not to mention that Pak Budi has to buy snacks for his labors. The yield at this round had reached 50 cans of peak harvest. If from every can he makes a profit of 20,000 then he gets a total amount of profit of 1,000,000.

This profit is divided for daily spends and debts during the lull period of coffee harvest especially due to this pandemic. Not to mention that Pak Budi has to attend traditional events which of course means he needs to spend more money. At this time Pak Budi

already had a chili plant that he planted before the main harvest season. So that the end of this harvest period, he might be able to depend on it for economic resilience. As a farmer, Pak Budi could only surrender to the situation. For the time being, he hopes that the coffee price can rise again after this pandemic. The reason why the patrons lower the price is because during COVID pandemic, the recipient countries does not allow coffee to be enter their countries. So that the coffee is stuck in the port and piles up. The warehouse effort was also not realized, the reason was that the government did not have enough space to store the coffee. Meanwhile, the price of coffee is decreasing over time and the rainy season comes, which means it's difficult for coffee to dry. So the patrons are reluctant to buy and sell. So Pak Budi must accept that the coffee he currently sells is only 50,000 / can.

Both Mbak Epi, Bu Maliah and Pak Anwar, all three experienced the same thing. Coffee bags are still lined up in the storage area in the corner of the third house. At that time, we were sitting and relaxing in the afternoon while talking about the drop in coffee prices due to the absence of global demand for coffee as a result of the pandemic.

Even though the great harvest had arrived, there was worry on their faces that could not be hidden. Apart from the rows of coffee sacks in the warehouse, there were also coffee beans that were drying, as well as coffee beans that had started to turn red in their garden. They worry, if the harvest will not produce as it used to. Apparently, distance not only separates people socially, but also reduces their income from coffee plantations.

Sadness could be felt, but life must go on, said Mbak Epi to the head of the Kapi while serving coffee made from selected coffee beans from her own garden. Mbak Epi's tenacity in running an agricultural business and diversifying it with various other sources of livelihood seems to be a solution when the COVID-19 pandemic conditions are having a significant impact on the national health system. Likewise, Maliah and Pak Anwar, with their varied livelihoods in the form of support plants, were able to help them support their lives even when COVID-19 is still happening to this day.

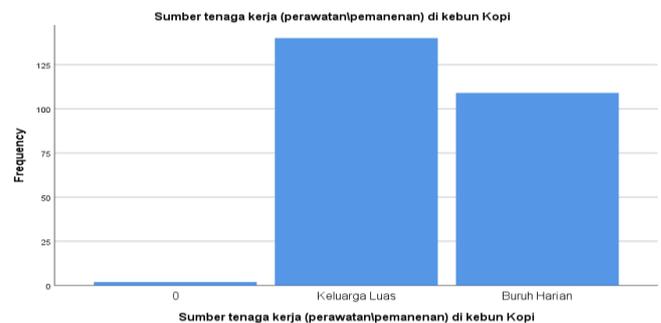
3.2. Gayo Coffee Farmers: Socio-anthropological analysis

The choices made by Gayo coffee farmers are rational actions based on knowledge that have long mediated in certain arenas. Not only they have to provide for themselves the minimum number of calories; they also must produce sufficient food above the minimum number of calories needed for the next planting season to obtain sufficient seed for the following year's crop, or to obtain sufficient food for their livestock. As explained by Eric Wolf (1985, 6), *the minimum calorie level is "the number of food calories required per day to compensate for the amount of energy expended by a person in doing his job every day.*

If Indonesia is around 1750 calories per person every day".

Coffee farmers in Gayo are also farmers in the sense of partially doing economic business; other than managing a household consisting of a husband, wife and children, some even consisting of their extended family also manage a coffee plantation with a business approach. Therefore, one of the morals they have related to their economic actions is what has been said [5], namely subsistence ethics on the one hand and rational economics on the other as conceptualized by Popkin (1981). Subsistence ethics is an act of prioritizing safety to avoid the risk of food shortages. From that ethic, there are changes in social relations and social structures. Starting from the pattern of reciprocity, the rental system, and the attitudes of farmers to the various problems they face, starting from the first planting to post harvest. Subsistence ethics is a form of social insurance which is a compromise for farmers to deal with their subsistence situation.

Therefore, in the maintenance and harvesting process, most farmers still use labor sources from extended families. Although the use of labor from workers living around their village is also an unavoidable option. This means that economic dualism is still a characteristic of coffee farming practices carried out by farmers in Gayo land as a whole. As can be seen in the table below in relation to the source of labor.



The use of labor from extended family members and day labors indicates that coffee farmers are part of a larger and more complex society. In the farmer economy, the largest share of production is intended to increase access to production in the next period. Although most of the means of production in society are decentralized, they are local and familial. However, it can be concluded that 1) Whereas relations of coercion and exploitation in the economic sector and social relations related to it are very unlikely to occur because dependence on the relationship between landowners and laborers only occurs if a farmer who is concurrently a laborer has cleared the he had worked on. But on the other hand, a farmer who owns a lot of land sometimes also has an economic calculation related to the use of farm laborers to help his production process.

2) because there are stimuli generated by the exchange of produce with a large number of goods in the market as well as the desire for a better livelihood and the desire for social mobility.

Coffee farmers in Gayo are farmers who are already on the currents of global communication and the situation is also not entirely determined by conditions which are internal problems of their own lives. The peasants are always in a larger system in the processes of production, exchange and consumption. [6] The presence of national scale industries that are represented in a product makes farmers stuck in a position filled with demands from outsiders when farmers try to maintain the existing balance. This is where the class created by industrial society was formed that rural peasants are a source of labor and goods that can increase their power funds (*Funds of Power*). Even the parable of Eric Wolf which says that outsiders look down on the peasants as looking down on a sheep which is periodically shaved for its fur [6].

And again, the commonly existing problem of farmers is finding a balance between the demands of the outside world and the needs of farmers to support their families, especially during a pandemic like today. As Bu Maliah, Mbak Epi and Pak Anwar have done, they are overcoming this most basic problem by adopting two strategies. First, increase the production and secondly reduce consumption. (Eric Wolf, 1985, 23). Farmers will adopt such a strategy, so they must increase the output of their work on their farm to increase their productivity and increase the amount of agricultural products they sell in the market. Its ability to do so generally depends on the extent to which it can easily mobilize the necessary factors of production, land, labor, capital (in the form of savings, cash or loan / credit). And of course he needs the help of others, because for farmers, factors of production such as houses and land are not only factors of production, but they have symbolic meanings. (Eric Wolf, 1985, 23-24). This will happen if there is no more power that can siphon off the production of peasants to the traditional powers in the form of land rent. Second, because of reduced ceremonial funds as a result of reduced traditional social ties to one another.

The phenomenon of the life of farmers with various relations resulting from their production can be seen in various technical arrangements such as selecting seeds, farming methods and planting time with the aim of dealing with the ecological vulnerability that is often experienced in order to avoid the risk of subsistence. As well as social arrangements that have the same purpose, namely avoiding the risk of subsidence, such as patterns of reciprocity, generosity of communal land, mutual assistance at work, helping to overcome the inevitable difficulties that may be experienced by a farming family. In its development, the existence of classes in the life of peasants in pre-capitalist times formed a romantic economic pattern between small farmers who owned land but still made leases to increase their livelihood income, the patron-client relationship pattern

was one of the patterns practiced by farmers at the time. pre-capitalist as a way to distribute the risk of these peasants. Likewise with the coffee farming community, the pattern of relationships that exist between them is based on an economic moral, namely subsistence ethics. With this subsistence ethic, the social relations between them are harmoniously established by distributing the various risks they have. Because the land in the farmer's family is evenly distributed, the patron-client relationship between the land owner and the workers is something that can be seen clearly there. Because farmers also have bargaining power against themselves. Instead, it could be said that labor was very hard to find, because they owned their own land. However, if they have to work to earn extra money, sometimes they choose to work outside their area / city for a while, before the harvest season begins.

Therefore, Gayo Coffee farmers build a coalition among them starting from their nuclear family, namely father, mother and child. And then the coalition grew bigger among his relatives and ended with farmer groups and finally cooperatives. The existing coffee production chain shows that the coalition among them develops on the basis of the coffee chain and distribution itself [7].

Therefore, the social relations built by coffee farmers in Gayo are closely related to the dynamic structure between the state and the market which is ultimately understood by them as exploitative and not exploitative. Therefore, for James C. Scott, standards and measures of how an act is exploitative and not is a matter of perception. Therefore, the perception built by coffee farmers in Gayo is about a strong feeling of social injustice among the population concerned with residents outside who enjoy development from the government. Thus, for farmers, when the government implements its legitimacy through the application of imports of agricultural staples or when the market mechanism comes into effect, marked by standardization of prices, has caused farmers there to think that there is exploitation by the structures above it. It can be seen that even though the current world demand for coffee is high, coffee prices continue to decline.

4. CONCLUSION

Nature and humans have been interacting in a dialectical relation. As people who inhabit Dusun Cemara, the residents have made good use of nature in every movement of its changes, so that nature has provided something that is needed by the people through utilization actions to allow the people of Dusun Cemara survive and carry on their lives.

Gayo coffee farmers in Dusun Cemara, which are the producers of agricultural and plantation products, are not alienated from accessing facilities from the outside, such as markets and large industrial products.

Therefore, the changes in the historical movement of the people from Dusun Cemara are a necessary result of their dialectical relation to a material. These changes include the changes on cropping patterns, use of seeds, changes in exchange and production patterns which are aimed at making money. Where the money will be spent on daily food.

Because the farming community needs to fulfill external demands and they sometimes don't even understand what is happening outside their community (for example: the Covid-19 Pandemic conditions), this requires farmers to produce something that is needed by other people, while what is needed by them sometimes has to be achieved by working on other people's land. Because farmers are in a broader relationship, farmers have various alternatives and strategies to keep them on the subsistence line. Moreover, supported by their experiences of residents who have migrated to other areas for a while, farmers have new knowledge about how to survive even with the toughest conditions.

One of the example is the strategy adopted by Mbak Epi, Bu Maliah and Pak Anwar. We conclude that the more varied the businesses/products produced by the farmers, the stronger the resilience and adjustments they can make in difficult times to survive. And what the three show is a model of the life of farmers who are able to survive despite the disasters that hit them such as the Covid-19 pandemic, difficult times, and ecological vulnerability

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