

“Sungkeman” During a Pandemic, What Do We Miss? An Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

Sungkeman or *silaturahmi*, a tradition at sacred family events or on religious holidays in Indonesia, cannot be completely transformed into cyberculture, even if it can be mediated through various technology platforms available today. Physical contact such as handshaking, hugging, and kissing our parents' hands cannot be mediated, while other aspects can be done via voice and visual communications. Even though *Sungkeman* can be mediated partially, it reduces its essence due to the lack of togetherness and direct intersubjectivity. This is what creates a sense of personal loss, something we miss during the pandemic, and it cannot be mediated. One thing that is bitter and ironic is that we are alienated in cyberspace – that is always considered as connecting with people in various places through various platforms. This paper discusses these aspects using autoethnography methods and narrative-descriptive writing, as a means of reflection as well as adding to the list of criticisms and the diversity of studies on cyberspace or cyberculture in Indonesia.

Keywords: *autoethnography, cyberculture, cyberspace, Indonesia, tradition*

1. INTRODUCTION

What you are about to read right now is one of our concerns in dealing with the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. To be frank, the experience we had was nothing compared to most of us who really lost family members to the virus outbreak. However, what we can contribute as per our background as anthropologists is a reflection based on observations, and research using autoethnographic method. We all experience loss during the pandemic. We have lost people, moments, jobs, and or various social-cultural aspects. In short, we are facing a time when a total change is inevitable.

Limiting physical contact and gatherings are consequences of slowing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Various new terms as a result of government policies have emerged: Pembatasan Sosial Bersekala Besar (PSBB; large-scale social restrictions), Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat (PPKM; restrictions on community activities), PPKM Mikro (PPKM for small areas), PPKM Darurat (emergency PPKM), etc., all for slowing down the outbreak while at the same time overcoming it. This is

where a problem arises, we as citizens have to deal with all the unexpected, while we know that cultural adaptation to new things tends to take time. At the same time, alternative technologies as media intermediaries are widely used, like video calls and conferences. On the one hand, technology bridges the absence of relationships with other people, but there is something missing from the tradition of togetherness and direct intersubjectivity. Thus, how do residents interpret the pandemic condition amid restrictive policies from the government? What is mediated and what is not from the use of technology by citizens in the context of the *Sungkeman* tradition during Eid al-Fitr?

2. METHOD

We chose autoethnography as the research method with several considerations. First the focus of this study is to translate a global phenomenon into the personal realm because the use of personal experiences as or in social research is exciting and valuable [1]. Second, the reflection of this method allows us to interpret the

meaning of a new line of terms from the results of government policies in relation to the existence of alternative technologies. Information and data were obtained through self-profiling from daily journals written along with reflection and reviews between the two authors. Furthermore, secondary data were obtained from reviews of academic works. The writing of this article is done using confessional tales [2] by carrying the spirit of performative writings as relational with a goal to contribute, or at least to inspire the readers so that they may reflect [3] on themselves in connection to overcome this pandemic, together.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present the research findings in two parts, the first is the experience of the first author, Ichsan, and the second is the experience of the second author, Wibi. The similarities and differences of the context setting, background and what considered memorable during the experience are expected to provide a detailed description that we interpret and reflect in the discussion section.

3.1 Emptiness of the rented house, Ichsan's experience

Not even a minute after the phone was hung up, the emptiness was already hanging heavily on my shoulders and mind. Yes, today is Eid al-Fitr on May 13, 2021, and the calls were from my mother and sister in Central Java, and from my father in West Papua, we made conventional cellular calls with group-call mode. On the phone, we asked each other how things were, then apologized to my parents and then my sister to me. In short, this is what is known as *sungkeman*, a tradition of forgiving each other during Eid al-Fitr. And this year our communication was worse than last year because we could only hear each other's voice, not in person.

Long before the pandemic when we still could do *sungkeman* in person, tears and sobs often broke out between us because the moment felt was really moving, binding us back to the understanding that we are a family, coming from the same roots. The 2020 pandemic that broke out in this country made it the first time we didn't do this tradition face-to-face. Moreover, I really couldn't go home because I was away in Papua and there was a policy of restricting transportation mobility by the government on Eid al-Fitr or better known as the *mudik* (homecoming) restriction. However, I could still video call with my family to apologize. The grief was healed a little even though I couldn't kiss Mom and Dad's hands, as a sign of my devotion to them. I could see them, the look of emotion shown on their faces, their red eyes did not hesitate to hold back tears, they were sitting together looking at me on the screen. I felt alone when other families can sit side by side even though they were a bit far apart, since I was in a faraway place.

The second Eid time in this pandemic, I could only guess what their expressions would be. Would their eyes still be red? What about the sad and longing look on their face?

Father : *ngopo kok mati internet e ? arep weruh dadi ora iso, nang kene [Manokwari, Papua Barat] iso padahal*

(Why is the internet down? We can't see you, here [Manokwari, West Papua] it (the internet) works)

Mother : *Iyo aku pengen weruh putu, kok malah raiso. Wis iso opo saiki bocahe?*

(Yes, I want to see my grandson, how come I can't. What can he do now [How's his physical development?])

Father : *Yo rapopo, sing penting tetep ati-ati kesehatane, suk nek wis mari ketemuan iso*

(It's okay, the most important thing is to take care of your health, when the things are back to normal, we can meet again)

Sister : *yo suk tahun ngarep bali wae pas kan si bocah wis gede iso diajak jajan haha, nang kene yo raoleh metu -metu wingi wae mung nang makam simbah resik – resik raiso dolan*

(Yes, next year, the boy [my son] is old enough to go for some snacks, we can't leave the house here, yesterday I only cleaned the graves of the grandparents, we can't hang around anymore)

Yes, to reunite and gather as one complete family. That was the only thing that crossed my mind after the call was cut off. I looked at the stove that had just gone out after a night of cooking *ketupat* (rice cake wrapped in a piece of coconut leave) and chicken *opor* (Javanese chicken curry). The dishes and cooking utensils were still scattered and hadn't been washed because this morning, my wife and my son were busy dressing up to welcome the festival which was unbelievably empty. Before I left this wooden chair, my wife came carrying my son – whom my father and my mother missed.

Wife : Who was that [the people on the phone?]

Me : Father, mother, and sister just now. I already sent your greetings. We'll call them again later because they're still busy right now.

Wife : Yes, no problem. Are we going to this mosque or not, Eid prayer?

Me : Let's just stay at home, I'm afraid there will be a lot of people later, something bad might happen.

- Wife : Okay, I just called my sister. [it's] sad she couldn't see us and her nephew. We cried, but what else can we do?
- Me : What? Is it weird?
- Wife : Why?
- Me : It feels like ..., well Last Eid, we still could see them. Now you can only hear 'em, isn't it weird?
- Wife : Yes, it feels a bit like that huh.
- Me : Empty, like there is no solemnity.
- Wife : You're right. Weird.

We ended the conversation and headed to the living room where the food we cooked was served there. For a moment we were silently looking at the room and things inside, tables, chairs, floors, the white walls, which we had cleaned yesterday. This rented house felt empty, there were no laughter and intimacy like in any Eid day. My wife said, breaking the silence, "if only we were at home, together".

3.2. The longing letter for the family, Wibi's experience

Due to the Indonesian government travel regulations, I couldn't meet my parents on Eid day. Thus, we missed our annual family tradition - a family gathering in which the whole extended family gathered in one place to celebrate Eid. I felt disappointed and hopeless, and here is my letter to my parents.

Sorry Mom and Dad, this Eid I can't go home. Honestly I miss both of you and home, the noises in the kitchen, the smell of spices, the warmth of the stove burning almost all day before D-Day, which we can't all feel and smell this year. If I could explain, if I were to visit Jakarta to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, who can guarantee that you won't be infected later? I'm scared I'll bring the virus. Yes, the virus that makes many people in this country crazily anxious. How regretful I'd be for the rest of my life if I infected you.

Maybe we can use a video chat app? Ah, yes, that's our routine every weekend, right? What's so difficult about using the app? Press this and that on the screen, and then we are connected. But I couldn't smell that old couch left by Simbah (grandparents), where I lay down when I got home. I couldn't feel my mother's hair and father's beard when we kissed each other's cheeks, a ritual we usually do when I get home.

Finally Eid arrived. From my house in Bandung, far away I could hear firecrackers. The next door neighbour's house was busy. They seemed to be able to gather. Why do I feel so disloyal? Aren't they afraid Mom, Dad? Didn't they hear the sound of the ambulance "wee woo-wee woo-ing" as they passed by? Sorry, we can only do video calls for now, okay?

The uncles announced in the family group chat about gathering. The first night, I couldn't wait for them to gather with us and their grandchildren, only this time it was different. The place where we gathered, Uncle's house, was not black, the walls were exposed to smoke from the stove. They were also not present on the computer screen. I also couldn't hear their voices clearly, like robots, sometimes interrupting each other, even though he hadn't finished talking. The voices of your grandchildren too, Mom, Dad. They were not heard. Couldn't they raise their voices? The voices of other small children were noisy at the back. It's like a webinar forum dominated by gentlemen. So, who is the focus of this meeting? Who chatted with whom, and what did they talk about? Then why were all the eyes on me? Were they talking to me? So, who should I talk to and what did I want to talk about?

We're obviously not used to that, Mom, Dad. Dad, I imagine you would just smirk. If it's not clear what you'd say? Who did you say to earlier? What's more, and Mom, your voice was as hoarse as Aunt and Uncle's who asked how their grandson was in Semarang, are you crying Mom? By the way, Mom, Dad, do you still miss me? I still do. How about another video call?

3.3 Sense of personal loss

Sungkeman is not just a matter of gathering and forgiving, but returning to the roots where we came from, affirming – reconstructing the identity of 'who we are'. Disruption due to traditions that do not run 'normally' is an unavoidable consequence since the pandemic. As you are reading, although the two descriptions above differ in terms of the use of technology, they both feel the same emptiness. What is not mediated in this case is the meaning that emerges as a result of the complexity of sensory experience, interaction, and togetherness. These three things are not fully mediated by alternative technologies. This partiality then opens the void, the strange, foreign, and lonely feeling of the two examples of cases. So, what about the meaning of all the people or at least us regarding this situation?

For us, the main priority in interpreting the pandemic and the government's restrictions is common safety and health, although there are doubts and negotiations, it is personally related to rituals and traditions that have been carried out from an early age. Amid the dialectic of the people – government regarding the pandemic has also positioned us in the constellation of social relations. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was mutual suspicion between the people and the government, in this case, viewed the restrictions on citizens' movements as merely implementing policies [4]. Most of the people cannot gather and are only confined to their domestic space, leaving technology as an alternative to stay connected.

Ironically, the alternatives of various media offered by technological advances in fact only partially answer the problem, on the contrary it gives birth to new meanings from the implementation of this mediated ritual. We are getting used to being seen in video conference boxes, guessing expressions through voices without looking at them. The meaning of community togetherness was eventually redefined [5]

4. CONCLUSIONS

The previous description leads us to an understanding that the use of technology as an alternative medium for communication in traditions or rituals gives a rise to new meanings for the actors. The depth of meaning has changed, alienated, and slightly uprooted from the presence that cannot be represented in visual or audio. Of course, further studies are needed to see the habits and technology of the people during and after the pandemic.

Otherwise, the attention of the authorities, especially the government, is not enough to see the cultural and personal situation of its citizens, which only appear to be a series of new concepts that sound foreign. Academically, the inevitable follow-up question is what will the rituals and traditions in society look like after this pandemic ends? Will the country pay little attention to it, or will it only be statistically understood?

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