

Maintaining Nature by Traditional Ceremony

Ethnographic Study of Traditional Ceremony of Ngalaksa

Mukhlis Aliyudin

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati

Bandung, Indonesia

mukhlis.aliyudin@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract—This paper describes the traditional ceremony of Ngalaksa which practiced by indigenous people in Rancakalong, Sumedang, West Java as an expression of gratitude to The Creator for the abundant harvest which is symbolically can be assumed as an important way to keep environment well maintained. The traditional ceremony of Ngalaksa has social values which are important to people and their environment. Using ethnographic method, it can be revealed the whole process of Ngalaksa ceremony is also used as the medium by indigenous people to maintain social cohesion among them and to keep nature balanced and maintained.

Keywords—*traditional ceremony; environmental communication; ngalaksa*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is a tradition that has been practiced by Rancakalong indigenous people in West Java. Geographically, Rancakalong district is located around 17 km west of Sumedang and 46 km east of Bandung. The word Rancakalong itself refers to two words in Sundanese, namely ranca (lakes) and kalong (bats) which believed has a deep philosophical meaning that people who live in this area should have a high character indicated by the height where the bats live and have empathy for others, as well as the depth of knowledge as the depth of a lake. For Rancakalong people, rice cultivation is a hereditary, so even though the area of rice field is not much as forest, they confidently apply cropping pattern from one to three times of harvest in a year, except on rainfed land.

As one of the most popular traditions, the existence of Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is believed to be almost in tandem with the history of Pasir Nusa village, which is now well-known as Cijere village in Rancakalong. Based on the local folklore, Ngalaksa traditional ceremonies were associated with a famine in the 15th century, whereas agriculture was the only way to live. This famine was not only resulted in lack of food for daily basic needs, but also has caused the scarcity of rice seeds for the farming. To meet the needs of food, Rancakalong people plant hanjeli to replace rice. But this does not last long since another disaster appeared and ended up with stopping to plant the hanjeli and re-plant rice, but they did not have enough seeds to plant.

To meet the needs, local community leaders decided to seek rice seeds to the Mataram Kingdom through several delegations. Unfortunately, the group founded similar situation

once arrived in Mataram so the seeds were not allowed to be taken outside of Mataram. As a strategy, the group leader created a musical instrument which was later called Tarawangsa and Jentreng. Tarawangsa is a string instrument like rebab with 2 (two) strings while Jentreng is a string instrument of a kind of harp but only has 7 (seven) strings. Both instruments were used by this group to perform in order to attract Mataram residents while explaining that the performance was an art to glorify Dewi Sri, the goddess of agriculture. Their presence and performance then spread to the palace and this group was invited to perform in the palace and they were given the seeds of rice in return. These seeds are then become the forerunner of the next rice crop in Rancakalong areas. This historical event is then continuously narrated from generation to generation through Ngalaksa traditional ceremonies as a form of historical reconstruction about how they obtained the seeds of rice.

This historic event becomes a point of departure for Rancakalong indigenous people to maintain the preservation and balance of nature. The famine that they experienced in the past became an effective reminder that the traditional ceremonies of Ngalaksa not only narratives about their history but also as a means to remind them to continue to show their grateful to God by preserving the nature around them.

Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is basically believed to be an expression of gratitude to God over the harvests in Rancakalong. Ngalaksa ceremony is originally held every three or five years according to the rice planting schedule and performed only limited to individual, but it has a magnificent ritual performed every year. During the ceremony, people perform a traditional dance accompanied by Jentreng and Tarawangsa, traditional music instruments filled with dances which initiated by Pemangku Adat (traditional chairman).

For the Rancakalong people, Ngalaksa is not only as indigenous ceremony but also as religious rituals that have ethical and moral implications for their daily lives. Therefore, this paper sees Ngalaksa ceremony as a part of ecological perspective of Rancakalong people which is based on religious belief. As we know, each society has an institutionalized value which closely intertwined and manifests itself in a system. These values are often used as guides in culture and the catalyst of life and one of the fundamental values in daily life. Religion is understood as symbolic universe that can give life meaning to human and provide the most comprehensive explanation of reality, such as; death, suffering, tragedy, and injustice and that

is why Berger suggested that religion is a kind of sacred canopy that protects people from chaos [1].

Thus, in a more specific contexts, religious and cultural practices can share the same symbols. Ngalaksa ceremony is one of the rituals that symbolically contain Islamic theological values in one hand and values of ancestral beliefs of Rancakalong people in the other hand. The symbols that appear in entire process of Ngalaksa ceremonial are interpreted and analyzed by ethnographic approaches which are considered to be able to serve as an approach to understand the context of the meanings of symbols that appear in cultural practice as an effort to maintain their environment keep balanced and harmony.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The symbols that appear in entire process of Ngalaksa ceremonial are interpreted and analyzed by ethnographic approaches which are considered to be able to serve as an approach to understand the context of the meanings of symbols that appear in cultural practice. Weber points out that in ethnographic perspective, human is essentially a creator of meaning [2]. Through these symbols, human represent reality as they want to convey because all cultural meanings are created by using symbols [3].

Practically, the research was conducted by participating in Ngalaksa ceremony by not ignoring the social context that occurred during data collection in the field study. In addition, the researcher attempts to remain sensitive to the various phenomena on the ground in order to construct and relate observed facts to the background in which they appear and then linked to the possible historical and cultural background. For an ethnographer, research findings cannot be separated from the particular environment in which they are obtained [4][5].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term of Ngalaksa in this ceremony is based on the core of the ceremonial procession and Ngalaksa can literally means "making *laksa*." For Sundanese people, *laksa* is widely known as a kind of rice-based food and wrapped by *congkok* (palm grass) leaves.¹ Rice was processed into flour and made dough to be boiled in a traditional stove made of banana stems. Ngalaksa ceremony is usually begun from 11 Shawwal until 23 Dzulqaidah. Along with the development of agricultural technology that accelerates the harvest season, Ngalaksa ceremony held in a more frequently namely once a year which is held on average for only five days and nights in a row. Nowadays, Ngalaksa ceremonial process divided into several stages in sequence and should not be missed and the preparation process of this ceremony usually takes about 40 days.

The whole series of traditional ceremonies Ngalaksa cannot be separated from the role of *Saehu*, the person who is appointed as the leader in all stages of the ceremony. There is no detailed explanation of the term of *Saehu* in this ceremony, but it is believed that the term is originated from the word "*Shaykh*" or "*Sheikh*" which in Arabic means teacher or person who has a wide range of religious knowledge. In addition, other theological values of Islam can also be easily encountered in all stages of Ngalaksa. Musical instruments played are Jentreng and Tarawangsa which believed are able to make a more solemn atmosphere that makes the participants drift in their imagination to relive the famine tragedy in the past. This historical consciousness has become part of the cosmology of Rancakalong indigenous people so that such historical events can make them even better in the future to be more grateful to God.

At some points, this ceremony shows a syncretism between ancestors' belief system to the Gods and also the Islamic ethics which are shown through the mention the figure of *Dewi Sri* which regard as goddess of agriculture while Islamic symbols are shown by reciting several Islamic prayer (*du'as*). At the end of the process, they will perform traditional dancing accompanied by Jentreng and Tarawangsa instrument. Tarawangsa performance which accompanying Ngalaksa traditional ceremony always begins with the song "*Saur*" (news, notification) which is a symbol of the notification to the local community to gain people to participate.

At least, there are two general meanings which are shown from Ngalaksa traditional ceremonies as an expression of gratitude to God over the abundant harvest. *First*, they express their gratitude through the dances and songs accompanied by their distinctive instruments, Jentreng and Tarawangsa. *Secondly*, the ceremony also serves as a tool for Rancakalong indigenous people to maintain their nature to keep balance and harmony so it will always give them benefit so well.

Among the few songs played were songs that could imaginatively "taking them back" into the past when they experience the famine. In general, there is no definite rule about the duration of a song being played in this ceremony since throughout the song, dancers and music players could experience natural ecstasy as it is carried away and blend with the mystical atmosphere. One of the songs that played is "*pangapungan*" (derived from the word *ngapung*, means flying) which means that flying is interpreted as an attempt to plead to Allah in Divine world. In addition, there are also the song "*panimbang*" (derived from the word *nimbang*, means measuring) which symbolize that human beings should be able to measure between good and bad and also to live balance and harmony with natural life.

The noble values contained in Ngalaksa traditional ceremony are not only viewed as a cultural ritual but also contain theological and social life. Not surprisingly as a traditional society, Rancakalong indigenous people interpret this ceremony as a tradition in order to maintain their appreciation to the nature. So it can be said that Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is essentially not only a cultural tradition, but a way to maintain the quality of religious beliefs in one

¹ Congkok (Latin: *Curculigo Orchioidea Gaertn*) has a common feature of having palm-like leaves that are small and have yellow flowers. This plant is often used as an ornamental plant because it has beautiful leaves and flowers, food wrappers, leaf fiber plants can also be used to make clothing. Excerpted from <http://tanaman--herbal.blogspot.co.id/2017/05/manfaat-tanaman-congkok-curculigo.html>, retrieved on December 4, 2017

hand while in the other hand to remain their environment keep balanced.

Rancakalong people see this world is full of symbols with profound and deep meanings. So, it can be said that Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is a form of symbolic communication to describe their joy while remembering the greatness of God. Likewise, rice for Rancakalong indigenous people is more than basic ingredient for their needs, but more deeply that rice is an entity that is alive and has services that cannot be measured by humans. In Sundanese, rice is known as *pare* and Rancakalong people interpret *paré* as a word which forms word *paréréndéng* (Sundanese: side by side as with the spouse) that symbolize that every human being should appreciate the rice as appreciating their spouse who should be treated with affection and placed in a proper place as well [6][7].

In some way, Ngalaksa traditional ceremony is can be mentioned as a form of historical narrative of their ancestors' struggle in order to get the seeds of rice to the outside of their area which was pretty far. The historical awareness of the symbolic meanings of Ngalaksa traditional ceremonies became the fundamental capital for Rancakalong society to keep them to appreciate the nature very well. By doing so, Ngalaksa traditional ceremonies can be assumed as an important ritual in strengthening their awareness to live in more harmony with their environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ngalaksa traditional ceremony in Rancakalong indigenous community is a form of historical narrative about gratitude to God over the abundance of harvest after a prolonged famine which experienced by their ancestors. In order to express this gratitude, they held a traditional ceremony which involved

Jentreng and Tarawangsa musical instrument, two traditional musical instruments which were also considered to have historical relation with their ancestor in the past. In addition, this ceremony is also a kind expression of spiritual effort to avoid any disasters in the future.

Thus, Ngalaksa ceremony can be interpreted as one of the efforts of indigenous peoples in preserving their natural environment. Through their prayers and historical narratives told, they seemed to warn of what would happen if they did not exploit nature wisely. At the same time, the nature that has benefited is believed to be essentially a gift from God, therefore it must be grateful and well preserved in order to continue to benefit humans and not be a threat, as has happened in the past. Functionally, Ngalaksa ceremony becomes a kind of reminder for them to remain grateful to God by keeping the balance of nature as well as possible.

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