

***Practicing Lore within a Modern Society:
Visiting the Traditional Mitigation Effort of the Kelud People***

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Abstract

As one of the active volcanoes classified in the *Ring of Fire* of Indonesia, Kelud is inseparable from the danger of eruption. From the outsider's view point, the devastating impact of the eruption upon the people living around the slope of the volcano seems as life-threatening. Kelud inhabitants, however, regard this repercussion in different way. They own traditional ideas, values, and beliefs in facing natural disaster which are customarily manifested in communal ritual and everyday life. For this reason, this paper attempts to dismantle the result of the ethnographic study on lore preserved and followed by the traditional people inhabited the area near Kelud. Though ritual is frequently perceived as a static activity because it is typically repeated and recognizable, it dynamically changes overtimes. Inevitably, it is open for great challenges caused by the infusion of modern concepts. Nonetheless, the thorough fieldwork done in one and a half year found that Kelud folks can employ the lore wisely in any condition, that renders them to be able to live side by side with an active volcano. By applying their lore, they learn how to respect nature and get familiarized with danger, which substitutes for a mitigation effort to lessen casualties of the volcano eruption.

Keywords: folklore, modern society, traditional mitigation effort, Kelud Volcano

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Introduction

Kelud is a part of the chain of volcanoes in Indonesia, which is known worldwide as *Indonesian Ring of Fire*. This *Ring of Fire* spreads across not more than ten islands out of seventeen thousands islands of Indonesian archipelago. The islands of Sumatera, Java, both of the West and East Nusa Tenggara, West Timor, Moluccas and northern part of Celebes, are quite densely populated by active volcanoes which counts as 147 volcanoes, in total. Out of this number, 30% of the volcanoes erect in the island of Java. Consequently, looking from this geographical condition, the threat of natural disasters especially volcanic eruptions cannot be avoided. Naturally, danger and casualties associated with the volcanic eruptions are the two things which become a part of the life of Indonesian people who reside in the closest area of the volcanoes, so as Kelud. And, the main effort to reduce the serious harmful danger of the eruption is mitigation.

Mitigation activity is an important factor for people who live in a potentially perilous area to be understood and aware of, before a destructive event or disaster happens. In connection to that, mitigation always has to be executed continuously in daily situation, although there is no potential threat of disaster. In connection with this, the scope of disaster mitigation includes any kind of activities which aims to lessen the impact of disaster. These activities can be done, of course, in many ways, be it from media and modern equipments, or by empowering the traditional mitigation which is more familiar to the local community before they got acquainted to the technology nowadays.

Traditional mitigation in its relation with volcanoes meant an effort or action executed by grassroots actors: the people who experience directly the impact of eruption. This traditional mitigation involves the indigenous, or the people who inhabit certain area where natural disaster occurs. Local traditional activities, which always refer to activities on the basis of community, such as communal ceremonies held by local people, are the mirror of collective culture that put a high value of living in harmony as a supporting idea on collectivism. As described by Feldman (2003: 400), “people in collectivistic cultures emphasize the welfare of the groups to which they belong, sometimes at the expense of their own personal well-being.” Nevertheless, several aspects of modernity such as social control, industrialization, global-capitalism (Giddens, 1990; Barker, 2008) lead to a sort of invasion that changes culture, including the collective traditional culture. This kind of culture – categorized as lore, is historical in its focus and is practiced by a particular group – also mentioned as folk. As a result, the traditional knowledge learned from folklore is established for time-honored (Crum, 2006).

Seeing lore in terms of traditional culture is paying close attention to ritual because ritual is not only embodying customary lore but it is also encompassing all categories of traditions. Ritual represents cultural expression which covers values, beliefs, and attitudes of particular group of society (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977; Sims & Stephens, 2005). Therefore, the objective of this study is to reveal how the Kelud people as ones living in “a unique condition – peace in danger”, struggle to preserve their cultural traditions in the frame of local context within modern ideas.

Literary Review and Research Method

The research executed is concentrated on the Sugihwaras Village, the ten kilometers radius from the peak of Kelud, within the Kediri Regency on East Java Province (Figure 1). This village is situated approximately 30 kilometers from the center of Ngancar Sub-district. Based on the ethnic subdivision of Indonesia, the spread of the Javanese ethnic group members covers Central Java and East Java (Geertz, 1983; Koentjaraningrat, 1999; Haq, 2011; Endraswara, 2015). Therefore, the people who inhabit Kelud area are classified as Javanese ethnic group – taking 93% out of 3296 total inhabitants. The natives and most of the inhabitants occupy rural area and adhere to agricultural life. Hence, they learn well how to live hand in hand with the volcano.



Figure 1. The area of the research.

The people of Sugihwaras Village are a representation of Kelud community, because this village is located on the foot of Kelud, which is the most susceptible place towards the impact of volcanic eruption. On dealing with natural disaster as a part of the existence of the volcano makes the people of Sugihwaras Village construct a culture which closely connected with mitigation effort. The engagement between people and their role in shaping culture was scored by Eriksen (1993), who affirmed that culture is a basic concept of a community. Because of that, Spradley and McCurdy (2012) proposed culture as the heart of cultural anthropology study, and therefore, culture cannot be separated from ethnicity in a certain area, “learning from people”, which intimately related with the aspects of human experience. The analogy is that the culture of Sugihwaras Village people is always going through a process and constructed by the geographical condition and their history of facing the many-times of Kelud eruptions. The accumulation of historical evidence in the line with geographical condition was strongly underlined by Alan Dundes (in Bronner, 2007: 91) as a linkage to shape culture. As such, research on traditional mitigation, which inevitably builds particular culture by the backdrops of the place where people live and the experience they have, is inherently attached to cultural studies.

Setting up from the basic concept suggested by Hartley (2003), cultural studies cover the study of everyday life in modern, urban and suburban societies which means an attempt to make this kind of life sensible. And for this study seeks the meaning of values, beliefs, and attitudes of local people living around Kelud Volcano; ethnography approach is used.

As an approach which oriented to the clarification of the culture of a specific community, the aim from a study stressing on the ethnography approach is to comprehend the way of life of the studied community in the same way that community comprehend their way of life. In short, the core of ethnography is culture, and culture is the product of the construction of human experiences. Spradley and McCurdy (2012: 8-9) accommodated three basic aspects of human experience which has to be investigated in ethnographic study: “what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use.” And consecutively, these three aspects will be reflected as “cultural behavior, cultural knowledge, and cultural artifacts.” For this reason, the study on the traditional mitigation effort in Sugihwaras Village in Ngancar Sub-district, Kediri Regency, was done by observing straight to the mark about all of the socio-cultural activities in connection with disaster mitigation. Subsequently, the search for answers about Kelud people’s knowledge on life in the volcanic area and how the knowledge is applied in their daily life were also covered.

Since traditional mitigation is shaped because of the geographical condition and the historical experience of certain people; the scope of this research is culture, which is defined as the learned, shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience (Spradley & McCurdy, 2012). Culture is not static condition. It changes over time, from place to place, in response to social dynamics. Therefore, folklore as a part of the cultural expression can be used to underline experience and social dynamics. As “the involvement in the daily activities of the community was expected to be the medium to understand the socio-cultural reality” (Jorgensen, 1989: 83); to build up an intensive interaction with the people of Sugihwaras Village, an intermittent research within a year and a half was executed. It focused on the crucial times of socio-cultural activities. The field research was started 40 days after the eruption on February 2014 because based on the traditional astrology, Javanese divination called *primbon*, after an “unpleasant” situation occurs; the new life begins at the forty-first day. After that, the fieldwork was done, first, by exploring how communal life was expressed through folklore during recovery period: 3 – 4 months after the volcanic eruption and second, by following traditional ceremonies or rituals which were only held in certain time and place.

Interviews with six informants were done to get in-depth information concerning with a preceding event or history, and the crucial role in the continuity of the existence of the traditional mitigation. The informants, personated by local informal leaders who have spiritual attachment with Kelud Volcano, are treated as the source of knowledge of everything about Kelud, whereas interviews with 96 indigenous respondents were conducted to complete qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

Javanese socio-cultural life is kept in a highly integrated order as portrayed in their customs and traditions. Social ideals should be represented in the love for peace and life in harmony¹. Van der Kroef (1955: 27) confirmed that Javanese people “stood for the higher cosmic unity which earthly society reflected”. On this account, they unite micro and macro cosmic life altogether. Microcosmos and macrocosmos cannot be

¹ This Javanese way of life named *Toto Tentrem*, which means ordered peacefully and harmoniously.

divorced: human, nature, spiritual world and material world are viewed as a unity. Correspondingly, Javanese consider that everything happening in the material world is definitely mirrored in spiritual world. As a result, they should take into consideration on their manners and apprehend that the problems in the world does not merely relate to earthly society. This notion is underlined by Suseno (1993) that to be qualified human beings, Javanese are required to avoid taking unworthy deeds. Having good conducts means sincerely doing self-involvement to keep the everlasting balanced relation between the spiritual world and material world.

In the spiritual level, the eruption of Kelud is mythified as the work of the mountain to eliminate the evils on the land of Java. Although it appears extremely frightening during eruption, Kelud Volcano is a holy volcano in the belief of the traditional people, so much so that the effect of the eruption can cleanse all the negative things. The name *Kelud* – also mentioned as *Klut* or *Coloot* – in Javanese language means broom, or also duster, which implies the cleaner of all dusts and dirt. The traditional people of Kelud believe that since the old times, the large scale eruption of Kelud is a form of resurrection to a better condition. As it was written by *Mpu Prapanca*² in his masterpiece *Kitab Negarakertagama*, the eruption of Kelud Volcano in 13th century could destroy all evils and annihilate every malevolent. Kelud has a role of cleansing the land of Java and sending Hayamwuruk as the king of Majapahit³ who brings prosperity and glory for his people.

As handed down through generations, the inhabitants of the area surrounding Kelud Volcano believe that there is a mystical power behind the physical shape of the volcano. This belief becomes their guidance, which in turn shapes their view about their nature, even toward the impact of eruption which, for common people, is interpreted as a dangerous and harmful threat. As a myth of a holy volcano, Kelud is very meaningful to the villagers who live on the slope of the volcano. Kelud which has become the part of their life reconstructs their knowledge or about the comprehension on the natural phenomenon around them. According to Danesi (2004, p.145) “Myth provides the metaphysical knowledge for explaining the human origin, action, character, as well as phenomena in this world.” Myth is always connected to individual, public figure, or the spirit of the figures acknowledged as heroes, having great contribution, or protector – all of whom are being mythified. Besides their respected local leaders, the indigenous people of Kelud Volcano believe in the spirits who protects them especially when the volcano shows the initial signs of eruption. Because of that, the findings of the research conducted in Sugihwaras Village significantly shows the existence of metaphysical world which manifests either in the daily life or in cultural praxis, which has connection with Kelud Volcano. “Ritual practices seek to formulate a sense of the interrelated nature of things and to reinforce values that assume coherent interrelations, and they do so by virtue of their symbols, activities, organization, timing, and relationships to other activities” (Bell, 1997, p.136).

² *Mpu Prapanca* is a distinguished great poet/author during Majapahit era, centuries before the beginning of Dutch colonialism.

³ Majapahit is the biggest imperium throughout the history of all kingdoms in *Nusantara*, Indonesian archipelagoes. Its conquered areas even includes the Malayan peninsula, Thailand, and the Philippines.



Figure 2 (Left-right). a.) Communal sacred ritual near crater; b.) Banyan Tree: *Mbah Bringin*; c.) Private sacred ritual at *Mbah Sumber*.

Bronner (2007: 45) noted that “folklore is not a relic of the past, as many people believe, but an expression of the present-day issues.” This statement signifies that folklore might be an intermingled cultural expression of past and present. This supports the fact found in the today practices of Kelud people. Historically, far prior to the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism, traditional Javanese society has had beliefs of supernatural beings that are mostly derived from the mythified legendary characters. These beliefs, now, are still retained and manifested in folklore.

In rituals held by Kelud community, the implication of mythical things is essential elements determining the procession of the ritual. The attachment of sacred places associated with the myth of the village spirit has strikingly evoked the soul of the ritual procession. The timing to hold the ritual is scheduled based on the local belief which cannot be detached from Javanese astrology. The places where the ritual executed also exactly adhere to *Dhanyang*⁴. In Kelud villages, there are three *Dhanyangs* regarded as holy spirits, sacred supernatural beings, so that they are awarded the respectful title of *Mbah* (Javanese = the elder). *Mbah Sumber* is the spirit residing at the spring water at the foot of Kelud (Figure 2c), *Mbah Bringin* is a big, shady Banyan tree (Figure 2b), believed by Kelud folk as the spirit which always protects the village, as well as *Mbah Punden*. The last mentioned is the burial ground of the original founder of the village who was for the first time cultivated the land on which the Kelud inhabitants live. The ritual practices do not only serve to praise the role of each *Dhanyang*, but most importantly to remind all the present-day Kelud people that the spirits always present and endlessly guard and overlook them, hence they can live harmoniously, peacefully, safe and prosperous.

As a part of traditional mitigation, ritual performed is also connected to the existence or the formation of the volcano. One of the legends highlighted in the ritual is how the Kelud crater was formed. The massive scale of destructions when Kelud erupts is construed as the curse of Jathasura who felt betrayed by Dewi Kilisuci, a young beautiful princess from Kediri Kingdom, and the knights protecting her. Jathasura, the antagonist in the legend, is depicted as an ambitious, arrogant and greedy person who died when he made a well in Kelud Volcano, which transfigured as the crater. This legend has permeated completely to the conception of Kelud people. And for this reason, the communal sacred ritual led by the spiritual leaders is conducted at the nearest place from the crater to calm down Jathasura’s anger. From traditional

⁴ *Dhanyang* is the spirit of the dead or certain material objects believed to possess extraordinary powers.

Javanese view, it is clear enough that myths have significant role in building people's spiritual world. "Myths are clues to spiritual potentialities of human life," (Campbell, 1991: 5). For Kelud people, myths enrich moral-ethical values: how to differ between good and bad, humble and arrogant, attentive and indifferent, how to respect the past and nature, even how to convey gratitude to God in a proper way.

In semiotic framework, the myth has a key role in constructing meaning. Chandler (2007) emphasized that the myth, which is culturally understood by the people, is very helpful in forming the people's comprehension towards their experiences within a certain culture. Therefore, the myth embodies the ideology of that culture, because the myth serves as the tool to form concept of the understanding. In connection with ritual, myth can be utilized as the ground to investigate the hidden historical values.

Van der Kroef (1955: 33) identified that "particularly since the nineteenth century, the traditional Javanese world view has been subjected to various western influence". This is also experienced by Javanese traditional cultural agents. That is why local/traditional knowledge is frequently compared to global knowledge as an analogy of modernity originating from West (Nygren, 1999). Interestingly, however, visiting rituals held by traditional Kelud people discovers that the dichotomy of local-global and traditional-modern seems very fluid. Traditional Kelud people have their own strategy to place their locality in modern context. The modernized ritual which is labeled as *Ritual Sesaji Gunung Kelud*⁵ is served for the sake of tourism program. It is the National Program aiming to empower the local people's economic independence through "cultural tourism". The phrase "cultural tourism" implied that in one package there are two purposes: "selling" cultural products and "attempting" to keep local traditions alive. If the definition of folklore embraces three concepts proposed by Ben-Amos (1971) as a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, and a kind of art; the goal of government program embodies smartly the duality of Kelud people's necessariness: spiritual world and material world. Since this ritual is performed as a festival to attract tourists so transformations are needed. The concepts of popular culture such as the role of mass media: advertisement, technology: audio-visual aids (Figure 3, middle), the law of supply and demand, theme of each event (Figure 3, right), and creativity, replace the traditional concept of folklore. The notion of gender equality also infuses the sacred ritual when it represents modernized ritual. The spiritual leaders⁶ who are involved in sacred ritual traditionally must be male(s) who have a lot of experiences in facing Kelud eruption and wear a designated uniform. However, today, young female dressed in striking color can also join "the ritual" (Figure 3, left).

⁵ *Ritual Sesaji Gunung Kelud* is Javanese term used for the ritual held in connecting with mitigation. *Sesaji* = offering, *Gunung* = mountain/volcano.

⁶ In Javanese called as *Sesepuh* = elders. They are chosen by folk because of their incredible local knowledge.



Figure 3. The changes of ritual from sacred to modern.

Ritual, both communal and private, which initially is a sacred activity, becomes an open activity for public due to the purpose of generating money. Group-network, rather than bounded groups because of the sameness of traditional ideas, values, and beliefs, does their job competitively to show their modern creativity. Working for offerings which take the important part in sacred ritual, because every component is a symbol of hidden meaning, need meticulous preparation. Opposite to this, offerings used in festival are artificial and meaningless. They are only ornaments created as interesting as possible to attract the audiences. Compared to the traditional offerings which are simple but meaningful (Figure 4, upper and lower left), the offerings exposed to tourists are lavish but wonderful (Figure 4, upper and lower right).



Figure 4. The changes of the offerings from traditional (left) to modern (right).

The change of world view and the adaptation to the current condition is common in socio-cultural activity of the every day, as Toelken stated (1996: 266) “Folklore is comprised of those artistic expressions most heavily governed by the tastes of the group.” To sum up, it is difficult to find out the cultural expression individually and independently.

Nonetheless, Kelud people are by implication showing that they are traditional Javanese people who are not exempt from modernity; however, they still love their own tradition. It is not only discovered through the informants' every day culture, but also recorded from the respondents' arguments on their cultural praxis. Approximately 60% of the respondents, that is 60 people out of 96, affirm that they strongly want to preserve their traditional culture. The 33% are in swinging position between obeying the power of Kelud tourism and perpetuating local ideas, values, and belief as moral-ethical guidance for their life, whereas the remaining 4% agree with the notion of tourism as commodity, while also being abstain. This data signify that living side-by-side with volcano need thoughtful deeds. For Kelud people, folklore is considered as an arena of interaction between individual human being and social human being. Borrowing Gidden's term on surveillance, one of the powers of modernization that commonly oppresses civil society, Kelud people respond to it naturally. They do not regard the control of Government through tourism program as a threatening tremendous power. Festival elevating local traditions occupies particular space different from the space they use to express their inward experienced values and beliefs. The control of Government over Kelud folklore brings about a unique cultural phenomenon.

Conclusion

By their traditional knowledge, Kelud people are able to negotiate the power of modernism in regards to tourism program, wisely by perpetuating their local wisdom lead to a great appreciation. The dynamic cultural phenomena in this modern era, that frequently marginalize folk, never make them bereave their ideas, values, and believe in their daily activities.

Seeing the rituals done by Kelud people, both in sacred and in modern rituals, it can be said that they are a mirror of wisdom. The dichotomy of traditional-modern which is simultaneously manifested in the *Ritual Sesaji* reflects the natural praxis. There is no exact borderline separates between the ones who stand beside traditional culture and the other; except how to genuinely posit "the self" as individual and as social human beings. Kelud people are in twoness. Living under the danger of eruption is not the reason to betray their own tradition. Even though their everyday is guided by Javanese ethics on being adaptable and easily compromising with the changes, they are never out of local context. Or, in turn, they oppose the materials created by the power. Since they uphold the philosophy of living in harmony, practicing lore is grasping coextensive path: spiritual world and material world. These two actually refer to a desired outcome, which is Javanese way of life.

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