

Ritual Reception of Sea Alms on a Pandemic Situation as a Form of Maintaining Local Tradition at the Tegalsari Fishery Port, West Tegalsari District, Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia

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Abstract. The background of the research is about the culture of sea alms ritual which has been done for a long time in history of a fishery in Indonesia, especially in Tegal City. In 2020, the world has been impacted by a dangerous COVID-19 virus and increase the status into global pandemic. The writers do a research about how the pandemic changes the behavior and how pandemic affects the way of the ritual. The writers are doing cultural studies with field observation method including interview survey from 4 respondents. Sea alms ritual is giving a present to the sea guardian. The present itself shaped like a cone called *ancak*, consisting of fruits, foods, and alms with a buffalo head. The sea alms ritual is held in a day called 1 *Sura* in Javanese calendar. The result of this research is about how pandemic has influenced the behavior of the sea alms ritual, and how the people adapt with that situation. Reducing the number of people, doing social and physical distancing as a new normal protocol are a must. The sea alms ritual is held in a limited situation, but it does not diminish the solemnity of the ritual itself.

1. Introduction

The sea alms as one of the cultures in Indonesia, especially in Central Java, is still maintained by the people who believe in it. Culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor, 1871: 45). The Kejawen people created the sea alms ritual. Our ancestors have held this for a long time; even today, they are still held in various regions every year by local area residents for the sea alms ritual.

The sea alms ritual at Tegalsari Fishery Port, West Tegal District, Tegal, is still highly held every year because most Tegalsari Fishery Port residents are fishermen and fish traders. The ritual is carried out as a form of gratitude to the sea god and goddess who has provided sustenance to the fishermen. The sea alms is attended by village elders, fishers, seafood sellers, local villagers, and even the mayor of Tegal. The event was organized by the fisherman association, *Karya Mina* cooperative units (KUD), and supervised by the Marine and Fishery Service. The residents and city leaders work together to preserve the culture that has been carried out from generation to generation by their ancestors.

In early 2020, the world was impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. It changes a lot of aspects, habits, and many things with their lives. It is also impacted how the sea alms

ritual should run. In normal conditions, Sea alms ritual is held in a Javanese calendar at 1 *Sura*. It is held with a sequence of events such as preparation of *ruwatan*, a night of *megeleangan*, the main event called *pelarungan*, and *dangdut* music event in a full day after *pelarungan*. *Ruwatan* is a ritual that asks for safety, happiness, and sustenance from the almighty God. *Megeleangan* is a night that everyone who participated in the sea alms ritual stays awake all night long and watches some

The pandemic, of course, changes how the ritual goes regularly. This article shows how the pandemic changes the behaviour and how pandemic affects the way of the ritual. This article also shows how the people from Tegalsari Fishery Port adapted with a rule of the new standard protocol to hold the sea alms ritual.

2. Methodology

Research methodology is a method to explain the research problem analytically. It may be described as a science of systematically analysing how research is done (Kothari, 2004). The writers have done a field observation as a part of the qualitative method to support the research. Observation studies as those that “involve the systematic recording of observable phenomena or behaviour in a natural setting” (Gorman and Clayton, 2005: 40). Spradley (1980: 6) wrote that participation observation “leads to an ethnographic description”. He defined *ethnography* as the “work of describing a culture” with the central aim of understanding “another way of life from the native point of view”.

The writers collected data from an interview with four respondents at Tegalsari Fishery Port, Tegal, Indonesia. Interviews are an appropriate method when there is a need to collect in-depth information on people opinions, thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Interviews are helpful when the topic of inquiry relates to issues that require tough questioning and considerable probing. Face-to-face interviews are suitable when your target population can communicate through face-to-face conversations better than they can communicate through writing or phone conversations (Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush, 2006: 1). The interview took on 23 to 26 May 2021 with four respondents. The respondents are from people that close to the ceremonial sea alms ritual. The first one is Sirat Mardhanus, aged 50, from Marine and Fishery Service. The second one is Riswanto, aged 41, from the cooperative unit (*KUD*). The third and fourth ones are Mustoro and Barak, aged 56 and 59, as a representative of Fishermen.

3. The Sea Alms Ritual on a Pandemic Situation

3.1. General overview of Tegalsari Fishery Port

According to the profile from the web pipp.djpt.kkp.go.id, Tegalsari Fishery Port is a Tegalsari Fish Landing Base (PPI) development built-in 2000 through the Coastal Community Development and Fisheries Resources Management Project activities or known as the Cofish Project. This project is funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as stipulated in the Foreign Loan Agreement Nos.1570/1571 (SF) INO dated February 2, 1998.

On July 4, 2004, Tegalsari Fishery Port was inaugurated by the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Megawati Soekarnoputri, with temporary management through co-

management between the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, the Office of Fisheries and Marine Affairs of Central Java Province and the City Government of Tegal. Tegalsari Fishery Port is located at Tegalsari, West Tegal District, Tegal City, with the postal code 52111. The fishing port has location coordinates of -6.849566, 109.129901 and is right on the shoreline.

3.2. The Preparation

According to information from Sirat (2021), the sea alms ritual was held as a pure community activity between the HNSI (Indonesian Fishermen Association), *Karya Mina* cooperative unit (KUD) and a group of fish sellers. They were fully handling the committee itself. The Marine and Fishery Service was only receiving a report for the event. They were also supporting the Regional Budget (APBD) budget for the ceremonial of Sea Alms. For the technical in the field, they are entirely in charge. Mr Sirat explained that the coordination between service and committee of sea alms connected with a correspondent from the committee to service. The service is also delivered a caution to the committee to understand the situation of the pandemic in order to regulate a strict health protocol to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. The protocol is about using a mask, constantly washing hands or using hand sanitiser, and social distancing.

In one line with Sirat, Riswanto (2021) said that sea alms preparation includes permission from the city government because this has become a unique cultural tradition in Tegal. It is scheduled annually and can be used as a tourist destination as well. Riswanto also explained because this program from fishers certainly involves elements of the association, the Indonesian fishermen association (HNSI), who have fostered fishers, where HNSI collaborates with fishermen economic institutions, *Karya Mina* as the cooperative unit. Another association is the Tegal City Fishermen Association; there is also the Young Fishermen Association. Riswanto continued that with the help from the Indonesian Army and Police before the events, the committee was carrying out active coordination, it was started with the moment when they were submitting a letter of application for permission to carry out sea alms also related to security and so on to support the event.

According to Mustoro and Barak (2021), the preparation for the external events of the sea alms is about *ancak*. The *ancak* was made by filling a lot of fruits and foods. It also consists of buffalo heads of each *ancak*. The availability of *ancak* depends on the budget and the needs for the events themselves. The committee collected the budget from each fisher to support the events. From Riswanto explanation (2021), the *ancak* is increased by level, from goat or sheep to buffalo heads. In 2020, the event was giving seven *ancak*, including seven buffalo heads.

3.3. The Process of the Event

The process of the sea alms ritual was held on September 6th, 2020. Sirat (2021) explained that last year sea alms ritual was carried out with the atmosphere of new regular activity so that the community was able to adjust in implementing it; there was still a crowd, but there were officers who always reminded them, and the community was also familiar with health protocols. The protocol is using a mask, constantly washing hands or using hand sanitiser, and social distancing. The difference is that it is not as crowded as it was before the pandemic. Sirat sees the public already has an awareness like avoiding the crowd.

According to Riswanto (2021), the sea alms ritual last year proves that the current generation is following what has become a previous tradition, such as *Ruwatan*. *Ruwatan* is a ritual that asks for safety, happiness, and sustenance from the almighty God. There is also such a *gunungan* shape called *ancak*. Inside of the *ancak*, there are various kinds of foods, fruits, and many more. There is also a buffalo head per *ancak*. In one night, there is such a thing called *Megelengan* where the *ancak* prepared for tomorrow ceremonial consists of a cultural tradition of the puppet show. Everyone has to stay awake all night long with a puppet show before the *pelarungan* ritual.

During the event, the prepared *ancak* were brought out to sea using fishing boats. The ritual of sea alms must be held in the month of the 1st *Sura*, Javanese calendar. Not all ships can attend the procession to the middle of the sea, so it is not forced all ships to return to the mainland to prepare for the sea alms ritual. Anyone who does not sail participates in the sea alms culture. The mayor of Tegal also attended the event to open the event because every year, they involve the city government (Riswanto, 2021).

3.4. The Importance of Sea Alms Ritual

The COVID-19 pandemic did not reduce the spirit and enthusiasm of the community to enjoy the sea alms ritual. Riswanto explained how vital the sea alms ritual is for the community. This is a tradition that exists every year so that they will continue the existing one. If they postpone it, of course, it will get attention from figures and elders of fishers. Many questions why there are no sea alms, what is the reason, even though the fishermen's condition continuously improves every year. Sea alms ritual also a form of our gratitude to Allah, because our economy depends on the catch of the sea, in contrast to our gratitude through alms poured in the sea. The goal is the same, but the manifestation of our abundance of gratitude from sustenance through the produced fish because what percentage of the most significant potential in Tegal City is fisheries (Riswanto, 2021).

The sea alms ritual cannot be changed because it has become a cultural tradition. In all areas, there must be sea alms. Moreover, this has been a hereditary tradition; because this tradition has been passed down from generation to generation, it cannot be erased. So every year, it must be held despite the lack of perfection. The important thing is there are *ancak*. There is no big party after the ritual because it is held ordinarily following the health protocol (Mustoro and Barak, 2021).

According to Sirat (2021), the people do not abandon their enthusiasm because this has been a longstanding cultural tradition. The problem of COVID-19 is automatically haunting the crowd, but because of the restrictions that are still implemented, the community feel safe. Of course, some are pros, because this has become a cultural tradition, then later most of the community will have a suggestion of cause and effect that must be implemented. Usually, people often relate, "wow, because there was no Sea Alms ritual, so something happened ...". in the other hand, the cons are those who realize that the process of sea alms on a pandemic like this will have an impact such as the emergence of a new COVID-19 cluster, named the Sea Alms Cluster. This is something that the committee had already thought about. If that does not matter, the present participants still have enthusiasm because it has become a cultural tradition.

Riswanto (2021) explained that they only focus on running smoothly in the *pelarungan*, the drowning of the *ancak*. Furthermore, for other events that are entertainment is prohibited, because they are concerned with the policies and rules that can create a potential crowd, we must comply with the existing rules. We have a big

responsibility if something uncontrollable happens, such as a crowd that creates a new cluster because later that will be impacted the committee. Riswanto added (2021) that the importance of sea alms is to reflect a sense of gratitude represented by the *ancak*. So far, fishers are looking for fish in the sea without sowing seeds in the sea with the hope that we provide meat like a buffalo head, where we feel that we planted the seeds with the intention of sharing. In addition to throwing the *ancak*, we also share alms with orphans, widows, the elderly, and so on. So it is more to give charity at the event.

4. Conclusion

In a pandemic situation, the sea alms ritual is about the community's people who love and are very loyal to their culture. Even though the global pandemic of COVID-19 is spreading worldwide, it does not diminish the solemnity of the sea alms ritual itself because of the community's enthusiasm to keep running the event. The respondents agreed that this kind of culture cannot be left out and must continue from generation to generation. The writers hope that this writing can provide something from a cultural event that impacted the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the writers also understand how shortcoming this writing is despite the conditions that forced us to keep careful with the situation. This writing can be elaborated better, and hopefully, it can be continued in the subsequent research.

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