

# COVID-19 Pandemic, Javanese Rituals, and Social Solidarity

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19 Pandemic has been going on for more than a year in Indonesia. The Indonesian government has been struggling to manage this Pandemic in various ways by implementing health protocols, Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), and vaccinations. This article discusses the efforts made by the Javanese people in coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic by using literature study methods and observations of the realities that occurred during the Pandemic in Semarang. The discussion focused on cultural practices carried out by Semarang society to overcome the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as the ritual of repelling logs, social care for affected communities, and cooperation in providing personal protective equipment for health workers. Based on this reality, it can be stated that socio-cultural capital is used to cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## 1 Introduction

COVID-19 has expanded and become a world pandemic since it was first discovered in Wuhan, China, on December 1, 2019 [1]. In Indonesia, this outbreak began when the first case was announced on March 2, 2020, in Depok, West Java [2]. Since then, the increase in positive cases per day in Indonesia has been getting higher. In August 2020, for example, there were more than 2000 cases per day. Currently, COVID-19 has been going on for a year, but there are still no signs of stopping. As of May 27, 2021, from 223 countries globally, a total of 168,040,871 people have been confirmed positive, with 3,494,758 deaths. Of the total world number, in Indonesia, there were 1,797,499 people who were confirmed positive, 1,649,187 people were declared cured, and 49,907 people died [3]. This condition has had an impact on all aspects of people's lives, including the high mortality of doctors and medical personnel, distance learning, and the economic recession [4]. To respond to these conditions, the Indonesian government has disbursed funds of IDR 203.9 trillion for social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. The Indonesian government has also implemented various methods to overcome the COVID-19 outbreak, educating the public regarding health protocols and implementing social distancing through Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB).

As a common problem, pandemics are not only a concern of the government. Many parties, such as community leaders, religious leaders, artists, etc., feel the need to play an active role in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in their own ways. This seems to be well

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understood by the Javanese community through various cultural practices that appear in rituals and cooperation. Both are manifestations of Javanese solidarity who believe in themselves as part of a cosmological, macro and micro-cosmic relationship. Through rituals, Javanese people try to rebalance themselves with the universe and their environment, while cooperation attempts to balance themselves with others [6]. The Javanese call the plague *pageblug*, which means disease. *Pageblug* occurs because of the appearance of *Batara Kala*, who is understood as a giant, time, or a shackling snare. *Batara Kala*'s form is depicted as not in the form of an enormous giant but in the form of a minor, soft insect attached to water and air [7].

According to Bayuadhy, *pageblug* comes from the root word *geblug* (*gebluk*), which means to fall or have a big explosion. This condition is illustrated by the number of victims that occurred simultaneously and widely [8]. The Javanese people describe how heartbreaking a *pageblug* can be with the phrase, *esuk lara, bengi mati* (morning hurts, afternoon dies). To deal with *pageblug*, Javanese people also recognize natural signs before the *pageblug* comes, which are called *tetenger* (sign) or *ilmu titen* (knowledge to understand signs), which is an event that occurs out of habit as a sign that something will happen. Events that have occurred in the past [9]. One of the popular is *Tetenger: Lintang Kemukus* which, among the Javanese people, is interpreted as a sign that a bad event will happen. Through rituals, the Javanese people also develop their distinctive social solidarity through cooperation, which they call *keguyuban* or *guyub rukun* (togetherness). Both ritual and cooperation are Javanese people's ways of creating a harmonious life.

Based on the description above, this article discusses the cultural response of the Javanese people to the COVID-19 pandemic through two things, namely, rituals and social solidarity. As for the concern, what are the rituals and forms of social solidarity of the Javanese people? How are these two things done and interpreted by the Javanese people? Are both manifestations of their cosmological understanding?

## 2 Method

This article was prepared using literature study methods and observations of realities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Semarang. Literature study is carried out by examining sources in the form of books, articles, and newspaper news both in printed form and those available in the form of files that are accessed online. Meanwhile, observations were made of the realities experienced by the authors in their respective neighbourhoods. The writing of this article also uses YouTube channels to access information on ritual practices through art performances. The data and information obtained from these various methods are then classified, interpreted, and compiled into an article with a predetermined frame of mind.

## 3 Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Javanese Rituals

There are two terms that interrelated and are often used in the same sense, naming ceremony and ritual. According to Winnick [10], a ceremony is a pattern of behaviour that remains in celebration related to the phases of individual life and group celebrations for a particular situation. Meanwhile, ritual is a formal action that remains in certain events related to belief in the Holy or mystical forces [11]. Ritual is a more limited form of ceremony and has a mystical nature and purpose explicitly. The ceremony has a broader scope than the ritual. Besides covering various aspects of human life, such as religious and aesthetic aspects, in a ceremony, several rituals can also be carried out at once. Here, ritual is not understood

as a pseudo-science usually associated with myth or magic but as an alternative to science [12].

In line with this understanding and the government's efforts to prevent the transmission and spread of Covid-19 at the start of the pandemic in Indonesia, which seems still stuttering and unclear, some Javanese people are culturally trying to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic with cultural practices. Some Javanese people who still maintain an agrarian culture recommend that the Javanese cook *Jangan Lodeh Tolak Balak*. Based on this belief, some people in the Central Java Province and Yogyakarta work individually and together this culinary as a symbolic effort to ask God to avoid the Coronavirus and be given safety [13]. Information on the vegetables to reject reinforcements circulated on social media and Whatsapp Group (WAG) on residents' smartphones. The seven kinds of lodeh vegetables as a repellent consist of *kluwih*, *cang gleyor*, *terong* (eggplant), *melinjo skin*, *waluh* (yellow pumpkin), *godong so* (melinjo leaves), and *tempeh* [14].

Finally, members of the Javanese community who have beliefs about it end up being hunted down. In addition, when Javanese people are hit by natural disasters such as earthquakes, they are obliged to present offerings. When an earthquake rocked in the month of *Sapar*, residents rushed to make *uduk* rice and black-feathered chicken, then read the *qunut* prayer. If a natural disaster occurs during *Jumadilakir*, those served in the form of brown rice and yellow-feathered chicken are accompanied by reciting a prayer of safety. When the arrival of Ramadan was accompanied by a disaster, the Javanese people served *dawet* and *bubur* (porridge), followed by reciting the Prophet's prayer. If an earthquake hits during the month of *Shawwal*, they make various porridge and recite the Javanese *tembang* [13]. They do this to be safe from the *balak* (plague) or what they call *pageblug*.

Javanese awareness about *pageblug* has existed in the past. They do this through ceremonies and traditions to ask for salvation while at the same time balancing their macro and microcosmic worlds. An example is the *Wilujengan Nagari Rajaweddha* tradition. This tradition began during the Pengging period and continued during the Demak Kingdom under Raden Patah. Epidemics and security disturbances that have resulted in people's misery have prompted the King, royal retainers, and guardians to ask Allah SWT for guidance. The result hints that the King must be *eling lan waspada*, *adil paramarta* (always remember and be vigilant and always act justly). *Wilujengan Nagari Rajaweddha*, which initially had Buddhist nuances, was harmonized with Islamic teachings during the Demak era. Buddhist prayers are copied and replaced with Javanese and Arabic vocabulary, although some still use the *Kabudhan* (Buddha) vocabulary. Implementing this tradition is evidence of the role of the government (state), religious leaders, and community friendship in the past. The tradition has continued to become *Wilujengan Negari Mahesa Lawung* in the Kasunanan Surakarta, while *Gramaweddha* became *Bersih Desa* or *Merti Desa* for rural communities [15].

Javanese artists also do not remain silent in the face of this COVID-19 pandemic. Their respective beliefs and ways carry out ritual practices to overcome the *pageblug* that their ancestors had done to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. One *dhalang* artist who has concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic and performs ritual arts is Ki Purbo Asmoro. In the third week of March 2020, Ki Purbo Asmoro held a single virtual puppet presenting the story of *Sudamala* or *Durga Ruwat* [16]. This solo *wayang kulit purwa* performance is a form of Ki Purbo Asmoro's concern over the Covid-19 pandemic. Through this performance, Ki Purbo Asmoro prays for the world so that the pandemic can end soon.

The ritual request to God Almighty for safety and avoidance of COVID-19 by using the *wayang kulit purwa* performance is also carried out by the Pandanwangi Association, an organization whose members include sellers of herbs and meatballs. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on their lives. They worked together to collect funds to hold a *purwa* leather puppet show with the *Kunjarakarna Ruwat* story with the Ki Purbo

Asmoro as dhalang. Through this performance held on August 14, 2020, they hoped to avoid COVID-19 and ask God so that Covid-19 could end soon [17].

In the midst of the boredom of the people who have limited space due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on November 30, 2020, the Committee for Handling COVID-19 and National Economic Recovery (KPCPEN) in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and Information of the Republic of Indonesia held a puppet show with the *dhalang* Ki Purbo Asmoro. In addition to the purpose of providing entertainment to people who have been bored because of their limited space and providing space for activities to artists who during the pandemic rarely or never performed, this performance also has a ritual purpose in terms of the chosen story, namely *Semar Boyong Ngruwat Lelara* [18]. Through this story, it is hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic will end quickly. Because the pandemic has not ended until the end of 2020, Ki Purbo Asmoro, on December 31, 2020, again held a solo puppet as a prayer for the year's closing by presenting the story *Sengkala Lebur* [17]. The choice of this play provides obvious indications that even though the pandemic has not been entirely overcome and ended, there is hope that this pandemic can end soon.

Meanwhile, Paguyuban Puji Langgeng Semarang also held a ritual of rejecting reinforcements using the theme "Gelaran Kidungan lan Barikan", which was held on Monday night *Paing* or *Senin Paingan*. The association of famous Ki Nartosabdho *dhalang* lovers, which was founded on July 15, 2012, since its formation, regularly holds events to commemorate the great Ki Nartosabdho artists by holding *wayang kulit purwa* performances, *klenengan*, and workshop every Monday night, *Paing*, which is the day of the death of Ki Nartosabdho. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the PSBB policy and other restrictions, Paguyuban Puji Langgeng changed the format of its activities by holding *kidungan* and *barikan* events. The *Dhandhanggula macapat* song, which is believed to be the work of Sunan Kalijaga was chosen to be sung at each of these events. This song, which is known to the broader community as *Kidung Rumeksa ing Wengi*, is believed to be able to resist reinforcements to drive out *pageblug* or pandemics. This *kidungan* effort is carried out by many groups, including Paguyuban Puji Langgeng on every *Senin Paingan*. This rejection of reinforcements is usually done by chanting songs and *barikan*. This song by Sunan Kalijaga is sung to avoid the public from *balak* or disturbances, both visible and invisible. This song has a deeper meaning, namely reminding humans to get closer to God Almighty so as to avoid even more terrible calamities. Among Javanese people, this *tembang* is considered like a mantra. According to the perpetrators' beliefs, first, to practice this *tembang* you had to fast *mutih* (rice only) for 40 days and *ngebleng* (wake up) overnight. In the past, this song was sung in the yard or yard at midnight 11 times [19].

As another spiritual endeavour, the Javanese people will also carry out the *Shalat Rebo Wekasan*. *Rebo Wekasan* or *Rebo Pungkasan* is the name of the last Wednesday in the month of *Safar* on the Javanese calendar. They believe that every year, there are 320,000 disasters will fall, and all of them occur in the month of *Safar* [20]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Rebo Wekasan* falls on October 14, 2020, to coincide with 26 *Safar* 1441 Hijri. Some people in the archipelago, especially in Java, perform special rituals on the last Wednesday of *Safar* month to reject plague or calamities. Some of the activities carried out during this day include *tahlilan* (dhikr), sharing food in the form of mountains and salvation, and the sunnah prayer *lidafil balak* together [21]. According to *Mujarrobot Ad-Dairabi Al-Kabir*, whoever performs prayers on that day is 4 rak'ahs, in each rak'ah read al-Fatihah 1 time, Surat al-Kautsar 17 times, Surat al-Ikhlas 15 times and *mu'awwidzatain* (al-Falaq and an-Nas) 1 time, then pray with the following prayer. Allah will protect them from all the calamities that fall on that day [20].

### 3.2 Social Solidarity

In simple terms, social solidarity can be understood as a form of taking care of each other. The term social solidarity has something in common, though not identical, with the sociological concepts of social cohesion and social capital. Both social cohesion and social capital are essentially “objective” concepts in the sense that they refer to the actual situation. Meanwhile, social solidarity often refers to feelings or attitudes and can also have a normative interpretation, namely the desired goal or situation. If social solidarity is manifested in individuals, then social cohesion and social capital are characteristics of a group or community. That is why individuals can show their solidarity, but they cannot be “socially cohesive” or “socially capitalists” [22].

In the context of COVID-19, the social solidarity of the Javanese people, especially Central Java, is shown by the *Jogo Tonggo* program. *Jogo Tonggo*, which means looking after neighbours, is a non-PSBB policy innovation program based on Governor Instruction No.1 of 2020 concerning Community Empowerment in Accelerating COVID-19 Handling at the Rukun Warga (RW) Level through the Establishment of the *Jogo Tonggo* Task Force [21]. The concept of *Jogo Tonggo* is based on the local wisdom of the people of Central Java, who are considered to have a deep concern for the environment and tolerance and kinship, which is still very strong. They call it the term *Guyub Rukun*, which means togetherness and harmony. The concept of *Jogo Tonggo* also rests on a sense of community solidarity, especially in rural areas, who look after and help each other in everything. Villagers in the Central Java region are used to sharing food, cooperating in building houses and protecting the environment with an environmental security system simultaneously and continuously. This spirit is expressed through the *Jogo Tonggo* Task Force, which is based on the main power of Central Java, namely the village (ALW 2020, 8-9) [23].

The *Jogo Tonggo* program has 10 areas of member structure, namely: 1) Karang Taruna (Youth Organization), 2) Dasa Wisma, 3) Posyandu, 4) PKH Facilitators, 5) PPL (Agriculture), 6) Village Assistants, 7) Other Organizations, 8) Residents, 9) Village Midwives, and 10) Linmas. Of the ten-member fields, they will be the ones who will assist the government in handling COVID-19. In addition, the *Jogo Tonggo* Policy also has working principles, namely: 1) Humanity, 2) Non-Permanent, during an Emergency, 3) Mutual Cooperation, 4) Transparent, and 5) Involving all parties. The *Jogo Tonggo* Task Force’s work fields include the fields of health, economy, social and security, and entertainment [24]. The *Jogo Tonggo* program refers to the community’s frontline, namely Dasa Wisma. Dasa Wisma is a Family Welfare Empowerment Program (PKK) that involves a maximum of 10 families. Their activities include anything related to community harmony, whether in social, religious or economic life. From Dasa Wisma, go up to the Rukun Tetangga (RT) level, then Rukun Warga (RW), to Kelurahan. This structure is not a new concept during the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather groups that were formed long ago. Integration between these groups and the *Jogo Tonggo* Task Force has been one of the keys to the success of the program.

The *Jogo Tonggo* program includes two things: social safety nets and security in the form of socialization, data collection, and monitoring of residents. Second, the economic safety net, which consists of two things, namely 1) ensuring that none of the residents goes hungry during the COVID-19 outbreak; and 2) making sure that people’s economic activities run well after the pandemic. Each *Jogo Tonggo* Task Force is led by an RW Chairman, who is assisted by RT Heads. This task force consists of a health team, an economic team and a security team. The head of the Task Force reports every day to the Kelurahan/ Desa, as well as the sub-district/ village reports to the sub-district to the city and the Province in stages so that the development and condition of residents in the Central Java Provincial Government can be monitored at any time [25].

In In Sendangmulyo Village, South Semarang District, the *Jogo Tonggo* program is running relatively well. If residents in an area are confirmed positive for COVID-19, the Task Force will monitor these residents to carry out self-quarantine or not leave the house. Through coordination with the local Dasa Wisma or Rukun Tetangga (RT) administrators, the Task Force ensures that residents carrying out quarantine have their food needs met. The choice of foodstuff types is communicated and agreed upon by the Family Welfare Empowerment (PKK)/ RT representatives with the residents concerned. In general, the food ingredients referred to include rice, noodles, eggs, cooking oil, and milk. There are also cases, residents who are positive for COVID-19 ask for non-raw food (ready to eat). This program generally runs for 14 consecutive days. In order not to feel heavy, Dasa Wisma made a rotating schedule from one house to another. A slightly different condition was shown by the Task Force in Rejosari Village, East Semarang District. The RW, which was at the lowest level in implementing *Jogo Tonggo*, experienced confusion in implementing the program. Due to the lack of funds, the RW Chairman and the RT Heads took the initiative to do self-help from the residents to raise funds and basic materials (Alkomari 2020, 32) [26].

Although there are different practices in implementation, *Jogo Tonggo* practice has become a best practice in realizing social solidarity based on local wisdom. For Javanese people, social solidarity will bring out a *rasa handarbeni* (a sense of belonging) as a fundamental asset in social cohesion in a society. Apart from *Jogo Tonggo*, social solidarity is also shown through the form of fundraising and opening donations of Personal Protective Equipment (APD) donations, as well as making APD facilities in the form of hand sanitizers, nano-filter masks, face shields to be given, especially to the Universitas Diponegoro (Undip) academic community and health workers in several hospitals in Semarang. This movement was initiated by the Diponegoro Disaster Assistance Response Team (D-DART) as a Disaster Management Center under the Undip Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) as a task force for mitigating and preventing the spread of COVID-19 [27]. In addition to the Undip academic community and health workers in Semarang, D-DART also provides APD to journalists in Semarang [28].

## 4 Conclusion

The Javanese people have their expression in responding to the plague (*pageblug*), namely by balancing their cosmological realm, both in the macro and micro-cosmic aspects. In the macro-cosmos aspect, the practice of *tolak balak* rituals carried out by some Javanese is their effort to make peace with God and the universe. This concept, in principle, places human consciousness as a weak creature on one side (*manembah*) and God and the universe as the Most Powerful force on the other side (*sesembahan*). Meanwhile, in the micro-cosmos aspect, as an effort to improve human relations, the Javanese people make this happen through social solidarity in the practice of *Jogo Tonggo*, cooperation in providing social assistance and APD for health workers. Both can be understood from the way the Javanese people position themselves as part of a universal society. Both have also been the socio-cultural assets owned by the Javanese people for a long time and can serve as a basis for handling the COVID-19 pandemic.



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