



Ethnography of *Ulur-ulur* Tulungagung Ritual and the Disconnected Memory

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Agrarian; Ritual; Disconnected Memory; Ethnographic.

How to cite:

Hakim, L., Ayuningtyas, F. (2022). *Ethnography of Ulur-ulur Tulungagung Ritual and the Disconnected Memory*. *ETNOSIA: Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia*, 7(2): 130 - 140.

DOI:

10.31947/etnosia.v7i2.22141

ABSTRACT

This research aims to elucidate the reason behind the decline of villagers' enthusiasm toward the *Ulur-ulur* ritual. *Ulur-ulur* ritual is a surviving agrarian ritual that was initially an integral part of and executed by four villages, including the Village of Sawo, Ngentrong, Gedangan, and Gamping Tulungagung Regency, as a manifestation of gratitude for the water of Buret Lake sustaining local's agricultural activity. Historically, this ritual was dying in 1965, then revitalized in 1966 by the Paguyuban Sendang Tirta Mulyo. Currently, despite being set as the annual agenda of Tulungagung Tourism and officially acknowledged as an intangible cultural heritage by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia in 2020, the villagers' enthusiasm remains low. To uncover this phenomenon, this research employed an ethnographic approach. In-depth interviews and participatory research were executed to obtain data. The result showed that the ritual was constructed and operated by two memories: *dhanyangan* (ancestral spirit) and agricultural memories. However, the impact of the G-30-S tragedy escalated the tension in the society leading to the vandalism of the Sri-Sedono statues, which were the mnemonic device of agricultural memory. Meanwhile, the *dhanyangan* memory, constantly amplifying, created a clash with the more religious society's narrative. The long vacuum period and the narrative shift make the association of ritual with the *dhanyangan* grow more robust, which contradicts the current social context. Furthermore, the revitalization, which was merely rooted in "defeated memory" led to the exclusion of the ritual from society.

1. Introduction

Based on data from Statistics Indonesia, in 2019 the total area of rice fields in Tulungagung Regency is 27,616 hectares. Meanwhile, according to the 2018-2023 RPJMD (*Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah* - Regional Medium-Term Development Plan), agriculture, along with fisheries and forestry are still the main contributors to

Tulungagung Regency's GRDP (Gross Regional Domestic Revenue) (Wakil Bupati Tulungagung, 2018). Those data show that agriculture is the backbone of Tulungagung's economy.

From the perspective of anthropology, it has been noted that agriculture is a source of many cultural products. Paddy, in particular, has a special cultural attachment to Javanese culture. The closeness and deep appreciation of Javanese farmers to paddy can be seen in how they associate paddy with the goddess of *Sri*, as a symbol of prosperity. This perspective eventually leads to the creation of various rituals. It is in line with Meer and Clarie (1979) who argued that the process of growing rice -from the beginning to harvesting- constantly involves rituals (Meer & Claire, 1979). Furthermore, Dewi elaborates on several rituals related to the growing process of rice, namely *Wiwit*, *Methik*, *Munggah*, *Lumbing*, *Ngirim*, *Mitoni*, and *Petanen (Pasren)* (Dewi, 2009).



Figure 1: Tulungagung Regency Tourism Map
Source:(Tulungagung Tourism, 2019)



Figure 2: *Telaga Buret*
Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2021

In regard to the previous explanation, several surviving agricultural rituals can still be found in Tulungagung. *Tiban*, *Manten Kucing*, *Manten Tikus*, *Tingkepan Pari*, *Panen Raya* and *Ulur-ulur* are the examples. Among those aforementioned rituals, the *Ulur-ulur* ritual is the biggest ritual having a unique historical story. *Ulur-ulur* ritual is the embodiment of gratitude of the people of four villages, namely *Desa Sawo*, *Ngentrong*, *Gedangan*, and *Gamping* for the water of *Telaga Buret* which sustain their agricultural activities. This annual ritual is conducted on *Jumat Legi* month *Selo* (Javanese calendar system) with a series of processions such as *arak-arakan* (marching of the participants of the ritual), *jamas* (cleansing) the *Sri-Sedono* statues, *tabur bunga* (sowing flowers) to the *Telaga Buret*, executing *slametan*, and performing *Tayub* dance. Historically this ritual had stopped for 31 years as the impact of the G-30-S tragedy. This movement, also known as *Gestapu*, is an attempt of coup by PKI by assassinating six generals of Indonesia National Army (TNI). In 1996, this ritual was eventually revitalized by the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo*.

In the past few years, the *Ulur-ulur* ritual has gained financial support from the government of Tulungagung. Furthermore, in 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia officially acknowledged this ritual as one of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Indonesia. This stimulates the ritual to grow bigger. Visually, the ritual becomes far more attractive. Various attractions and details have been included in the ritual to attract more attention.

Interestingly, despite the rapid development of rituals under the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirtomulyo*, the enthusiasm of the people of the four villages toward the ritual does not grow. On the contrary, it tends to decline. The majority of ritual participants are invited guests, while the locals are merely witnessing the ritual from a distance. The development of the ritual which is not in line with the growth of the local's enthusiasm becomes the focus of the research.

2. Method

As a product of culture, the *Ulur-ulur ritual* is an inseparable part of a dynamic society. The constant change in society is triggered by both internal and external factors. To obtain more profound insight into social change, ethnography is employed in this research. Ethnography is used in various disciplines. Ethnographic research varies, ranging from conventional ethnography involving researchers in a community for a long time to mini-ethnography (mini-ethnography) involving researchers in a group, community, or subculture in a relatively short time (Spradley, 2007).

Some other experts, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) argued that “ethnographic research occurs in a natural setting and often is undertaken to record processes of change. Because unique situations cannot be reconstructed precisely, even the most exact replication of the research method may fail to procedure identical results”. Thus, phenomena, behaviors, and beliefs happening in the community are natural and the role of ethnographic researchers is to observe the process of change that occurs in society (Bandur, 2016).

For Hammerly and Atkinson, the most important characteristics of ethnography are the direct involvement of the ethnographer in daily life, the observation of what is happening, listening to what is said, asking questions, and collecting whatever data is available to explain the issue of the research (Mulyana, 2018).

The term ethnography comes from the words *ethno* (nation) and *graphy* (to describe). Ethnography, rooted in anthropology, is a research activity to understand how people interact and work together through the observed phenomena of everyday life. Thus, ethnography usually aims to describe a culture as a whole, namely all aspects of culture, both material, such as cultural artifacts (tools, clothes, buildings, etc.), and abstract ones such as experiences, beliefs, norms, and values systems of the group. Thick description is the main characteristic of ethnography (Hymes, 2004; Kuswarno, 2011).

To answer the research question, this research takes several steps. Firstly, the research tried to analyze the memory or narrative within the *Ulur-ulur* ritual. Secondly, it explained the social shift by theoretically linking post-1965 cultural violence and its impact on the sustainability of narratives in rituals. Furthermore, to validate the theoretical explanation, field data were included. The research was then expanded by analyzing the growing narrative and the contestation of interests revolving in the *Telaga Buret*, which created barriers between society and the Ritual.

3. Result and discussion

Dhanyangan and Sri-Sedono: The Main Narratives of *Ulur-ulur*

Like other cultural products, the *Ulur-ulur* ritual is constructed by dynamic and static elements. The static elements are the core of the ritual containing values and beliefs maintained and nurtured by society. This is as suggested by Sims and Stephens (2011:99) who wrote, “Rituals, then, require a set of beliefs and values that group members accept and want to have reinforced. The rituals work to teach their importance by emphasizing

–even acting out –these values or beliefs.” By preserving the static aspect of the ritual, the embedded value contained in the ritual will survive and can be transmitted (Sims & Stephens, 2011). Assmann (2008) argued that ritual is a medium to transmit the collective memory. It means that the values and beliefs hidden in the static aspects of the ritual are rooted in the collective memory of society (Assmann, 2008).

The memory that is continuously preserved and reproduced becomes the narrative of the ritual and constructs the structure of the ritual. There are several static aspects maintained in the ritual, including the location (*Telaga Buret*), time (*Jumat Selo*) of the ritual, *Jamasan Arca Sri-Sedono* (cleansing the statue of Sri-Sedono), *Slametan*, and *Tayub*. Those aspects are deeply rooted in the main narrative of the ritual, namely *dhanyangan* (ancestral spirit) which, in the *Ulur-ulur* ritual, is associated with *Eyang Jigang Joyo*, and the agricultural narrative represented by *Sri-Sedono* Statues.

Dhanyangan is the first narrative in the *Ulur-ulur* ritual. *Dhanyangan* is described by Geertz (1960:23-34) as the spirits of deceased historical figures. During his lifetime, *dhanyang* came to a remote area (untouched forest), cleared the area, settled down, and divided the land of the area among his followers (Geertz, 1960). He later became the village headman (*lurah*). This is the reason why in Javanese terminology, *dhanyangan* is close to the phrase '*seng mbabat alas*' (the one who cleared the forest/the pioneer). Furthermore, when *dhanyang* dies, he is buried in the center of the village called *pundhen*. In the context of *Ulur-ulur*, the *dhanyangan* believed by the local community to inhabit *Telaga Buret* is known as *Eyang Jigang Joyo*.

The field research reveals that *Eyang Jigang Joyo* is believed to be a knowledgeable figure from the Mataram Kingdom. Along with a group of cavalries, he went to the east. In the middle of the journey, he found a baby crying inside the dense forest. Driven by compassion, *Eyang Jigang Joyo* decided to take the baby with him. When arriving at the area that is now called Buret, the baby cried from thirst. *Eyang Jigang Joyo*, then, prayed to God for help. The story tells that *Eyang Jigang Joyo* then dug up the ground to find water. From the hole, the water was surfacing and forming what is now known as *Telaga Buret*. The duration of *Eyang Jigang Joyo*'s settlement in the *Telaga Buret* area is not known. However, it is commonly believed that before leaving the area, he advised the locals to preserve the *telaga*. Nowadays, right in front of the tip of the *telaga*, there is a stone believed to be a *petilasan* (a sacred site regarded as part of a spiritual or historical figure's journey) of *Eyang Jigang Joyo*.



Figure 3: Ritual in front of the *petilasan*
Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2021



Figure 4: the *petilasan* of *Eyang Jigang Joyo*
Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2021

The second narrative of the *Ulur-ulur* ritual is an agrarian narrative symbolized by the Sri-Sedono statues. These two figures are an important part of the cosmology of the Javanese agrarian society as symbols of *sandang pangan* (literal translation: cloth and food/welfare). Sri and Sedono are ancient concepts in Javanese agriculture. The word Sri itself comes from the Sanskrit word which means prosperity, welfare, fortune, wealth, and beauty. In Javanese society, the Goddess of Sri is associated with rice plants.

Related to the narrative, Yadji, an elder of the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo*, said that there used to be a *Kademangan* (ancient village) named *Glagahwangen*. At that time, *Kademangan Glagahwangen* underwent a great famine. After investigation, it was found that this famine was triggered by the desertion of Sri-Sedono for Cempa. To overcome the problem, the chief of *Kademangan Glagahwangen* invited neighboring villages namely *Talun* and *Popoh* villages to go to Cempa to pick up the Sri-Sedono. Sri-Sedono accepted the request of *Glagahwangen* with one condition. The people of *Kademangan Glagahwangen* had to provide *Gajah Putih* and *Kijang Kencono Tlacak Wojo* (white elephant and golden deer with steel legged) which were symbols of the *mori* (shroud) and *ani-ani* (traditional small knife used to harvest paddies). Those prerequisites are the metaphors of the ritual requirement used in *Ulur-ulur*. After completing the prerequisites, Sri-Sedono returned

to *Glagahwangen*. *Glagahwangen* and two other *kademangan* are symbols of the three villages, namely *Sawo*, *Gedangan*, and *Ngentrong* villages, which are involved in the ritual.



Figure 5: The *Sri-Sedono* statue
Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2021



Figure 6: The *Jamas* (cleansing) *Sri-Sedono* statues
Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2021

The two narratives, the *dhanyangan* and agrarian, are the core of the *Ulur-ulur* ritual that generates the ritual. They both hide in the different mnemonic devices which are preserved by society.

Cultural Violence and the Disconnected Narratives

Those two narratives hid in the ritual until 1965. The erupting social tragedy of G-30-S (commonly associated with the Indonesia Communist Party) affected the existence of the ritual. The social change occurred instantly. Polarization between the *Javanism* adherents who believed in the ritual, and the opponents were surfacing. This escalating phenomenon eventually led to cultural violence. Galtung (1996:196) explains that cultural violence is using cultural aspects such as religion, ideology, language and art, empirical knowledge, and formal knowledge to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence (Galtung, 1996).

Cultural violence triggered by the G-30-S tragedy encouraged the unilateral labeling of certain groups. Farmers and *Javanism* adherents were two of the many groups that suffered from such haphazard labeling. Their collective activities were linked and associated with *PKI* (Indonesia Communist Party). This made traditional society

reluctant to conduct ritual or other cultural activities due to the fear of being surveilled. To some extent, the surveillance caused the transformation or even death of several indigenous cultures. In the case of the *Ulur-ulur* Ritual, this cultural violence and surveillance was linked to the destruction of the original *Sri-Sedono* statue in the *telaga Buret*.

Borrowing the notion from Assmann (2008:111), *Sri Sedono* statues are mnemonic institutions functioning to preserve the collective memory of *Desa Sawo* and the surrounding (Assmann, 2008). Jones (2007:1), moreover, asserts that memory is fragile therefore humans need material culture to preserve and transmit memory (Jones, 2007). In the context of the *Ulur-ulur* ritual, the *Sri-Sedono* statues are mnemonic institutions containing the memory of agriculture. Therefore, this statue is very vital for the preservation of the collective memory of the surrounding villages. Furthermore, since the collective memory is one of the elements forming the identity, the destruction of the statue can be translated to the elimination of identity.

However, when analyzed more profoundly, the two narratives within the ritual undergo different fates. This is due to distinct mnemonic institutions of both memories. The agrarian narrative hiding in the *Sri-Sedono* statues is more vulnerable than the narrative of *dhanyangan* hiding in the *telaga Buret* (natural landscape). It makes the narrative of *dhanyangan* relatively more well-preserved. The *dhanyangan* narrative which escapes the G-30-S tragedy becomes the dominant narrative that is firmly attached to the *telaga buret*. This explanation is shown in the illustration below.

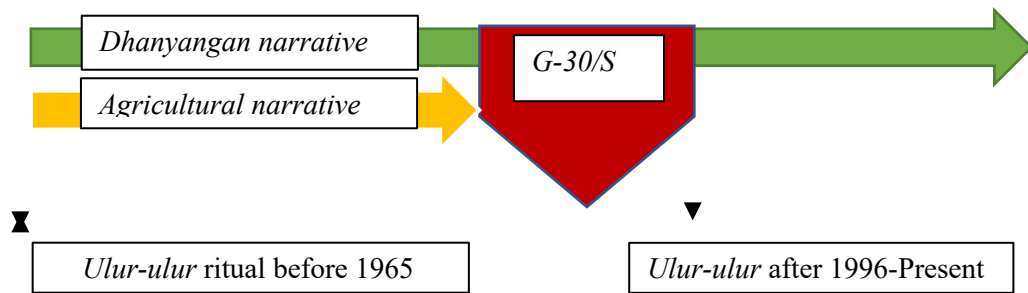


Figure 7: the illustration of narratives within the *Ulur-ulur* ritual

Source: Research finding

The illustration shows that initially *Ulur-ulur* Ritual was constructed by two narratives, namely, *Dhanyangan* narrative and agricultural narrative (*Sri-Sedono*). Those two narratives are represented by green and yellow arrows. This condition lasted until 1965. The cultural violence triggered by G-30/S tragedy, which is symbolized by red pentagon, ruined the ritual. The destruction of the *Sri-Sedono* statues as one of the mnemonic devices of ritual crumbled the narrative of agriculture. The disconnected narrative or memory of agriculture is validated by the findings obtained from the interview showing that the majority of the people do not recognize the narrative of *Sri-Sedono* as the representation of the agriculture narrative. Therefore, the yellow arrow representing agriculture memory does not pass the red pentagon of G-30/S.

With the disappearance of the agrarian narrative from the community, the *dhanyangan* narrative, which escaped the tragedy of G-30-S, automatically becomes the single and dominant narrative in *Telaga Buret*. It is symbolized by the green arrow which passes the red pentagon. Consequently, any rituals or activities carried out by the people in *Telaga Buret* become synonymous with *dhanyangan* which is contrary to the dominant religious narrative, including *Ulur-ulur* which was revived by *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* in 1996.

Revitalization from the “Defeated Memory”

In the midst of shifting and disconnecting narratives, by 1996, people who secretly still preserved the memories of *Ulur-ulur* tried to revitalize the ritual. However, the disconnection of the agrarian narrative and the escalation of the *dhanyangan* narrative made the *Ulur-ulur* ritual strongly attached to the *dhanyangan*. This condition, indeed, is counterproductive since the religious narratives held by most people are not in line with the *dhanyangan*. Moreover, the fact that this revitalization process is merely rooted in the “defeated memory” and not based on the dominant collective memory makes this ritual not a representation of the surrounding community but belongs to only a small group of people. Rituals that used to be an integral part of society, are now being possessed by a small group of people. The barrier created by the ruined narrative makes people reluctant not only to re-engage in rituals but also to deal with the *telaga Buret*.

The above condition made the revitalization of the *Ulur-ulur* ritual tough. With minimal community support, the *Paguyuban* finally embraced the *Kasepuhan Handono Warih*, which was a well-respected *kasepuhan* in Tulungagung. Our informant said that the members of *Handono Warih* were retired officers of the Tulungagung Regency Government. Furthermore, this *kasepuhan* has a strong legal basis. Therefore, the recognition or collaboration with *Kasepuhan Handono Warih* can be interpreted as a strategy of *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* to survive amid a more apathetic society.

To revitalize the ritual, the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* reconstructed the ritual based on their collective memory. The preexisting aspects of the ritual became the primary basis of revitalization. The *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* performed what Hobsbawm (1983:2) as inventing tradition by reviving a tradition based on the picture of the past (Hobsbawm, 1983).

Over time, the *Ulur-ulur* ritual under the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* began to be noticed by the government of Tulungagung. This ritual was then considered as a potential that can generate the economy. The need for *Paguyuban* to get recognition and assistance from the government was in line with the government's need for tourism and regional identity. Regional autonomy made Tulungagung Regency, through the tourism office, eagerly support the revitalization process of this ritual. Eventually, the mutualistic symbiosis between the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* and The Government of Tulungagung occurred (Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo, 2006).

The Tulungagung Tourism department uses the *Telaga Buret* narrative and the *Ulur-ulur* ritual as a vehicle to increase tourism, and the economy. The ritual is also utilized as the cultural identity of the regency. As an extension of the local government, the tourism department of Tulungagung keeps funding the ritual to make it more captivating. The *arak-arakan* (marching of the ritual's participants) becomes one of the parts which is being developed by the Tourism Department and *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo*.

Despite those improvements in the *Ulur-ulur* ritual, the core problem which is the disconnected memory of agriculture is not realized. The enhancement was likely targeting the surface of the ritual, while the essential issue remains untouched. This makes the ritual fail to rise the enthusiasm of the society.

4. Conclusion

The *Ulur-ulur* ritual has become an annual agenda of Tulungagung. In 2020 it was designated as a national intangible cultural heritage. However, amid this appreciation, the public's enthusiasm has decreased. This research found that the social upheaval as the result of the G-30-S tragedy caused the *Ulur-ulur* ritual to stop for 31 years. Moreover, the destruction of the statues of Dewi Sri and Joko Sedono which was the mnemonic device of agrarian narrative has made the *dhanyangan* narrative a single dominant narrative in the ritual. This made the revitalization executed in 1996 by the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* less attractive to people who tend to be more religious. In addition, the fact that this ritual was revitalized from a "defeated memory" makes this ritual no longer "belongs to the people of the four villages", but is exclusively owned by the *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo*. All those factors made the *Ulur-ulur* ritual less attractive for the local people.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results.

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to thank to *Paguyuban Sendang Tirto Mulyo* and Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta, Indonesia for support during this research.

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