TRACING THE MYTH OF THE PEOPLE, AS PART OF LIFE
(A CASE STUDY OF DAMPU AWANG FOLKLORE)

Nanny Sri Lestari
Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
pbintangpagi@gmail.com

Abstract

A community is the largest unit of the society. Society is a collection of several communities that have a common agreement. In everyday life they make a mutual agreement both oral and written in life. The agreement was made. There are mutually agreed rules, norms and values for mutual preservation among the people. One unique example is to look at a society that lives in a shared environment that then guard each other by agreeing on a common myth. Society does not object to the myth, the people accept the myth willingly without having to express likes or dislikes. An example of this is folklore about Dampu Awang. Dampu Awang story is known as a folklore in the northern coastal area of the eastern part of the island of Java or precisely in the vicinity of Rembang. Local people believe that Dampu Awang was native Javanese. According to the oral story of the local people, they believe that Dampu Awang was a nomad from Java who then succeeded in trading with the people. Dampu Awang came back to Java and landed in Lasem's big port. For the local people, Dampu Awang was very reliable and had great stories. Based on the oral story of the society, local people believe that Dampu Awang was not just a successful nomad and merchant but also someone who introduced new influences. As a wanderer and wholesaler Dampu Awang bought a lot of crops from the local community and also brought a wide variety of merchandise that could be exchanged for the produce. Trade activities conducted by Dampu Awang provide opportunities for local people to interact with the people from outside the archipelago. It is interesting that this Dampu Awang myth does not only belong to the locals but also to Chinese immigrants in Rembang. They know this story with their respective story variants. Dampu Awang is considered to have left a large relic; an enormous ship anchor placed in front of a church in Kartini park. This myth is kept around in the form of oral folklore delivered from time to time.

Keywords: myth, character, trade, trust, oral story

Introduction

In everyday life in this earth, we recognise the existence of three creatures: human, animal and plant. Of the three creatures, humans are considered as the most perfect creature. Human perfection as a creature on earth is believed due to the fact that humans have elements of culture and intuition.
Both of these elements are not owned by animals or plants. Plants though cannot move like animals and humans but have a life development. Plants start from the growth of flowers and fruits, which then die and grow back from the other seeds. Humans and animals have the same experience, only humans and animals are skilled with movements, whereas plants do not experience this.

In everyday life people are not the same as animals because humans have very real elements. These cultural elements are, *cipta, rasa* and *karsa*. Elements of *cipta* means that people are given the ability to understand what is right and wrong in a community. It is this element that causes humans to always doubt something and pursue the truth. In other words, humans are able to think critically about certain phenomenon. That is why people encounter knowledge and always develop it. Elements of *rasa* means that people are given the ability to know and feel beauty. Human beings can feel things related to harmonious and balanced issues. This condition allows the development of a sense of art that exists in human beings thus generating knowledge of aesthetics. Elements of *karsa* means that human beings are given the ability to be able to weigh their own feelings in the community to express a proper, or inappropriate, and other attitudes in order to deepen the value of etiquettes in interaction. With strong intentions in one’s inner self, this develops knowledge about ethics or morality.

Elements of *cipta-rasa-karsa* is a basic understanding to understand the cultural values of a society. Society is considered to be the main actor in cultural developments and changes. This situation provides an illustration that society has the right to decide what the people want to do in life. Today the people who join in a large unity called the state, certainly have a mutually agreed agreement and ideals. Within the society of a state, commonly recognised cultural values are instilled because the society cultural values are the content and the essence of life, and is the measure or norm of *cipta-rasa-karsa* itself. From this point people are perceived to have awareness or understanding of the rules, values and norms of science, rules, values and aesthetic norms (beauty) and finally the rules, values and norms of decency. The problem is thus every society in this world has its own size, and none has the exact similarities. This happens because humans think about nature and the environment where he lives.

In subsequent developments people recognise the term community along with manners or human behaviour. This behaviour is personal but can also be individual. This behaviour is closely related to daily habits in the natural and social environment of society. Through manners, human behaviour is depicted as well as one’s inner attitude. A person’s inner attitude is reflected in his or her daily behaviour. This condition then becomes a general description for the behaviour and attitude of a particular society. This research would like to describe behavioural attitude of society in a district town, Rembang, by tracing the people’s myth as part of life. Through people's myths as part of their life, the elements of society's point of view in everyday life can be observed.
Research Methods

This study is based on the fact that tracing the myth of the people as part of their life is a journey of understanding human life and society. How people address a certain issue in their life becomes an interesting phenomenon to study. The intrinsic approach allows the understanding of very specific and meaningful things. With qualitative methods, the phenomena occurring in society can be elaborated with meaning, without having to measure how many members of the community who use it (Lexy J. Moleong, 2011:37).

According to Franz Magnis Suseno (1991), it is not easy to interpret an object or event in human life, but human wisdom is essential in living a very dynamic life wave. The Javanese society develops its creativity in relations to the feeling and intention through their actions and thoughts.

According to De Yong (1976) Javanese people often seek ways to personal interests to be tailored to their environment so that no collision occurs. Mutual respect and appreciation both to nature and to fellow human beings and to the Creator are the main attitude of life.

On the other hand, Arthur Asa Berger (2010) states that an object is not something that stands alone. An object represents something to be conveyed to the person who saw the object. The same is expressed by Marcel Danesi (2010) that an object is a sign that has a message and meaning.

This is the reason to why the Javanese think that the relationship between man and the Creator becomes very deep without being exaggerated by sound but through simple signs (Niels Mulder, 1980). This series of symbolism in life is the dynamic sequence of meaning following the change of time and space that occurs along with the clockwork, hence the Javanese society which does have a series of symbolism in its life, will continue to move dynamically in the face of change (Budiono Herusatoto, 1985).

Region Description

Rembang is a town on the north coast of Central Java or rather often referred to as Rembang district. Rembang is a district town that is part of the province of Central Java. Geographically, Rembang regency is bordered by Rembang Bay (Java Sea) in the north, and is located on the border of Central Java and East Java. Rembang Regency is located on the coordinate line 111000' - 111030' East Longitude and 6030' - 706' South Latitude. In general, the condition of Rembang Regency is a lowland with maximum altitude of approximately 70 metres above sea level.

The northern region of Rembang district is an area of hills with several hilltops, often called Butak Mountain, with a height of 679 meters and another hilltop, often called Mount Lasem, with a height of 806 meters. Around the area there is a reserve of the Celering Mountain which is now protected. The Rembang people's livelihood consists of salt farmers, crop farmers, fishermen, food industry, other private traders and civil servants. On the other hand, the Rembang
community consists of various ethnicities, not just the Javanese. These multi-ethnic societies coexist in daily life.

The Rembang community is known as a very open society. Various artworks are produced in Rembang. With their creativity Javanese people have batik with a very high quality. One of the districts in Rembang is Lasem district. The district town of Lasem is actually an old city. In the history of the small town of Lasem, it was a port city. It was oldest port city most visited by merchant ships from abroad, especially from China and India.

Picture 1: District of Rembang

As an ancient trading city Lasem is indeed the entrance of trade for the northern coastal region of Java. Almost all the ancient kingdoms in Java around the north coast of Java used Lasem as a trading port. In addition to natural resources, there are also other merchandise such as batik and other crafts. As a port city that triggered trading activities, it was inevitable that the town of Lasem was the place where various tribes from various countries settled. The migrants began to interact with the local population. The interaction began by getting to know each other as a resident with respect.

Around the 18th century, the VOC government established a colonial administrative centre in the new town of Rembang. Since then the colonial government was running in Rembang and the small town of Lasem became part of the town of Rembang to date. Nevertheless, all routine activities of the community in Lasem continued to run as usual.

On the other hand, Rembang as a new town began to be visited by many residents. Residents from various regions around Rembang district visited there and later lived in the city of Rembang. Trade and industry begin to move to adjust

The activities of the community in Rembang ran like most communities around the world. People carried out their work every day and interacted among nations in the town of Rembang. Indeed, the population is not plenty, but the society can perform daily activities to fulfil their life.

**Dampu Awang Story**

According to the version of the story I found, *Dampu Awang* is a popular folktale in the northern coastal area of the eastern part of Java island, especially in the Rembang area. According to the local people's oral story, they believe that *Dampu Awang* was a native Javanese who went abroad to change his fate to become a wealthy merchant. After successfully changed his life outside his birthplace, *Dampu Awang* returned to his native land on the island of Java. *Dampu Awang* came to Java and landed in Lasem’s big port.

For the people at that time the arrival of *Dampu Awang* was very significant. The arrival of *Dampu Awang* brought great blessings to the trade at that time. *Dampu Awang* is believed to have brought a lot of precious merchandise. On the other hand, *Dampu Awang* bought a lot of the local community produce to be brought out of Java.

Radjiman Suwarto (1967: 20) mentioned that *Dampu Awang* story begins with the story of a mother who had 4 children. One of them was called *Dampu Awang* who was a very lively and sociable kid. *Dampu Awang* was very intelligent, handsome and eloquent. These four children begged to his mother to go wandering. The mother who was used to seeing her people - especially the younger generation – travel then allowed her four sons to embark their journey. After so many years of traveling his four sons had never contacted his mother.

It is said that one day, one of the four young men, in his wanderings met the old woman. The old woman tried to greet *Dampu Awang*, but *Dampu Awang* did not recognize who the old lady was. The old woman still greeted *Dampu Awang* as her son. *Dampu Awang* constantly denied. The climax of the old lady was very angry at *Dampu Awang*. The same thing happened to *Dampu Awang*. *Dampu Awang* issued a rough and dirty word to shove the old woman away to prove that she wasn’t his mother. The old woman was furious and upset because he did not recognise her as his mother.

In a great quarrel, which came up with the curse, the oath uttered by the old lady to *Dampu Awang* actually happened; *Dampu Awang* turned into a stone. This event was certainly surprising both parties. *Dampu Awang* story does have many variants of the story, even this story is already recorded. This folktale has many variants but the most important is the story of a woman who is considered older than a man who is considered younger.
Many people from all over the isles deeply believing in the legend of *Dampu Awang*. In Rembang, there is an enormous ship anchor. The anchor is located in Kartini Park. By the local community the anchor is considered an anchor of the merchant vessel from *Dampu Awang*. This condition shows a public effort to prove that a legend can be proven as reality.

**Folklore**

Folklore is a cultural wealth of society. Folklore is classified into the so-called *intangible heritage* cultural wealth. As an intangible cultural wealth, of course the story has a certain meaning. Maria Marta (2004) *Dampu Awang*’s story is a very simple story. This means there are several sides that are very easy to digest, such as the following points.

Firstly, the side of a mother who has children, especially boys. Second, children who go wandering without sending any message to the mother. Third, the success of a child in wandering. Fourth, a child who does not recognise his parents. Fifth, maritime folklore.

In contrast to the folklore that is widely documented in old texts, *Dampu Awang* folklore is an oral story that was delivered from time to time. As a traditional oral story, the story is known to the people not through formal terms but rather from non-formal terms. People have freedom in telling stories, but as an oral folklore, of course *Dampu Awang* story has plenty of versions, but the substantial plot remains the same. Folklore can be spoken by anyone. Folklore has a very flexible nature of the story, meaning there is no particular bond besides the same main story.

Arthur Asa Berger (2010) states that an object is not something that stands alone. An object represents something to be conveyed to the person who saw the object. The same is expressed by Marcel Danesi (2010) that an object is a sign that has the message and meaning of the first part of the story. *Dampu Awang* story represents something to be conveyed. There are several things that the story relates to, but the main story of this folklore is that every married woman longs for her children.

The first part of the story contains a mother who has a son. For a family, a son is desirable and important. Due to the importance of male offspring, we often hear the phrase ‘the mother and her son’. This phrase may be positive but may also be negative. As human beings we must always think positively.

In *Dampu Awang*’s oral story, *Dampu Awang* is the third of four children. Another version of the story illustrates that *Dampu Awang* was the only son. On the other hand, this story also relates the harmony of two different figures; between the female character with male character. In this case the female character has a strong position in terms of the inner, but has a weaker position in the world, while the male story has a stronger position in the world but weaker than the female figure.

Secondly, the main story revolves around a child who goes wandering without sending a message to his mother. For traditional society, wandering or
traveling is an activity that must be done by boys. Wandering is an activity of initiation. Initiation is a period of maturity or transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood. To reach adulthood there is a situation that must be lived or pursued.

The situation is expected to lead boys who experience initiation into adulthood with experience and maturity of thought. In traditional communities, the initiation process should be instilled early on. Every boy is introduced with this story. Later one day the boy must undergo this initiation without feeling shocked, rejected or isolated. In traditional societies it is often described that the initiation process can be done by wandering or going to war.

In certain society, the process of wandering may be more emphasised. This initiation process does have two sides of weakness as well as strength. The weakness occurs because parents do not interfere in the initiation process. In this case *Dampu Awang* was not at all times able to meet his mother or give news or talk with his mother. As a result, *Dampu Awang* couldn’t recognise his mother. In terms of the strength, the time that had passed had shaped the figure of *Dampu Awang* to grow stronger, smarter, mature, and rich, such that he did not remember about his mother. While the mother was getting older, did not undergo any social change or remained poor, but had a very strong memory of her child. According to Franz Magnis Suseno (1991), it is not easy to interpret an object or event in human life, but human wisdom is essential in living a very dynamic life wave. The Javanese society is the society which develops its creativity related to feeling and intention through their actions and thoughts.

Thirdly, it tells the success of a young man named *Dampu Awang*. In olden days being a trader was a high aspiration. Not everyone was able to achieve these goals. Therefore, every parent always wanted his son to be a wealthy merchant, including for *Dampu Awang*. In this story it is depicted that *Dampu Awang* managed to change his fate from an ordinary person into a rich merchant. Described in various versions of the story that *Dampu Awang* was able to pave his way to becoming a merchant, through a long journey of struggle.

According to De Yong (1976) *Dampu Awang* is considered as a figure capable of representing the Javanese society in his era. Javanese people often seek ways to personal interests to be tailored to their environment so that no collision occurs. Mutual respect and appreciation both to nature and to fellow human beings and to the Creator are the main attitude of life. *Dampu Awang’s* struggle in pioneering and developing his business as a trader is a process of initiation that must be passed by *Dampu Awang* to become mature and ripened. As a result, *Dampu Awang* was not only a trader in one place but *Dampu Awang* was a wealthy merchant who owned a large and powerful merchant fleet.

Fourthly, a child who did not recognise his parent. This part is the long-term impact of all events at number one and two three and four. From this event can be seen a journey of human life from birth until he grows up. Ahmad Zuharnis (2002: 43) states that wandering is an activity that should be done by boys. Adventure is an initiation for boys. Conflict of interest is very common. The society considers the behaviour and attitude of the inner soul should not change.
and must always be maintained to keep up the harmony of the social structure of society as well as to keep the relationship between the great universe and the small universe to remain well preserved.

Fifth, the child who goes wandering without sending any message. Having the meaning of communication is very important. If communication disconnects then people do not know the news about each other, such that even the relationship of a family can be broken. Disconnection causes both sides to feel hurt.

Sixth, the success of a child in wandering. The culture of wandering for people in the past is very important. Wandering is used to forge a child's physical and mental development to achieve maturity. The culmination of this initiation activity is to improve the social standard of living is common to coastal communities. Damanto Danuri (2007: 56) mentions that wandering means to have to fight in a distant land. If one has to fight in a far country, one should be able to return home with good results. Therefore, wandering is a struggle or initiation of maturity.

Conclusion

A story from a certain region usually describes the region in both physical and inner form. Dampu Awang story provides an overview of a region of Rembang located on the northern coast of the island of Java. The story can be intrinsically known that there is one cultural point of view that puts men in a balanced position with women. For the Javanese people, this balance is important because people believe that the creation-sense of initiation will balance the way in human life when there is a deep understanding of personal life, as well as living in a community environment.

Through the story the community raises their inner attitude in two balanced positions. Society with their inner attitude, realises that there is one agreement that must be respected together. This agreement must be respected, so the story of Dampu Awang is considered a common lesson about human life in society. For the Javanese, it is important to be willing to honour the agreement to overcome all sorts of challenges. Thus, the story of Dampu Awang is considered a common lesson about human life in society.
References

De Yong (1976), *Salah Satu Sikap Hidup Orang Jawa*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius
Franz Magnis Suseno (1991), *Etika Jawa* Jakarta: Gramedia
Marcel Danesi (2010). *Pesan, Tanda, dan Makna* Yogyakarta: Jalasutra