COASTAL CULTURE OF THE WEST SUMATRA: LANGUAGE AND RITES AS SYMBOLIC POWER

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Abstract

As the largest archipelago country in the world, Indonesia has sizeable marine potentials. These maritime potentials, both biological and non-biological, are stored in the vast ocean area of Indonesia that can be managed in a sustainable manner for the welfare of the society. Referring to the coastal-culture owned wealth of local culture, geography, and natural resources, it is very relevant as if it can be developed to improve the economic and cultural capital of the region. The hallmark characteristics of Indonesia distinguish coastal areas with other regions of the mainland. The characteristics become a cultural sign that encompasses several aspects, ranging from geography, population, social life, use of language, livelihood to technology. Language and rite are important signs as a symbol of the strength of a culture. This study aim to describe the use of the language and rites of West Sumatra coastal communities that have a cultural resistance—which still in use or valid to date. There are many verbal terms that are used in daily activities, especially in activities related to people's livelihood. Some terms arise from the local custom, while some other terms are created by the myths and beliefs of society. This research finds the cultural values as local wisdom that are found in the form of rites and cultural expressions uttered by coastal communities of Padang City and the southern coastal of the West Sumatra.

Keywords: culture, local wisdom, sign.

Introduction

This study limits the observation area in the exposure of coastal culture in Padang City and the south coast of West Sumatra. Padang City itself lies between latitudes 0°44’00” and 1°08’35” and longitudes between 100°05’05” and 100°34’09”, located in the middle of the west coast of Central Sumatra. Padang City has borders on the north to the Padang-Pariaman District, on the west to the Indonesia Ocean and the Mentawai Strait, on the south to the South Coast District, and on the east by Solok District. Padang is the capital of West Sumatra province and is one of the cities/districts in the province which is located on the coastal areas, other than West Pasamat District, Agam District, Padang Pariaman District, and South Coast District. With approximately 2,420.385 km long of West Sumatra coastline, Padang has a 68,126 km long coastline. According to the Government Decree No 17 Year 1980, Padang has an area of 694.96 km², equivalent to 1.65 percent of the total area of West Sumatra province. Padang City has 11 sub-districts. The widest sub-district is the Koto Tangah (232.25 km²), and the smallest is West Padang (7 km²). Because it is located on the west coast of Sumatra, Padang City has high risk of earthquake and tsunami, as it can be seen in the current development growth of Padang City that leads to inland mainland or away from the coast.
The other observation area is the southern coast of West Sumatra (South Coast District). South Coast District is the southernmost on coastal area of West Sumatra, with the largest area and the longest coastlines of 5,749,89 km$^2$ and 234 km. It borders with the Padang City on the north, Solok District and Jambi province on the east, Bengkulu Province on the south and the Strait Mentawai also the Indonesian Ocean on the west. South Coast District consists of coast on the west and the hills on the east, which is the part of the Bukit Barisan. It has 15 sub-districts, in which the largest sub-district area, Lunang Silaut, reaches 937,04 km$^2$, whereas the smallest is the Bayang Sub-district with an area of 78,82 km$^2$.

![Picture 1. The coastal area of Padang municipality](image)

Having an understanding of the observed areas, we find the conceptual category of meaning and significance on the local wisdom. Using an interdisciplinary approach in cultural studies, which are language studies and literature studies, this research finds the cultural values as local wisdom that are found in the form of rites and cultural expressions performed by coastal communities of West Sumatra. The relationship between local wisdom and cultural values becomes a symbolic power that binds and signifies the local identity. This study answers this question research: what indigenous culture values that can be found in rites and verbal expressions uttered by the coastal community of West Sumatra?

**Local Wisdom and Cultural Values**

In life, humans create and run culture. Culture is the result on the work of human mind and power (work culture), which have evolved over time in accordance with the development of the human mind and its environment. Thus, culture is seen both as product and process. As a product, culture manifests in the form of concrete (goods, artifacts) and abstract (system, paradigm, -ism, etc.). As a process, the cultural forms are used, modified, developed, even modified to form a new culture.

Beyond culture, there is an environment acting as the background of cultural existence. Given human nature and human interaction with the environment, in our opinion, the environment can be divided into three, namely the physical, mental, and social. Humans need to survive in the
midst of a natural physical environment with its various characteristics. Meanwhile, as dynamic creature, humans also have inner environment as modes (expectations, wants, wishes, aspirations, etc.). As social beings, humans need others to run life, to overcome the problems of life and to achieve their goals. In the social interaction, humans do not only to utilize, to create or to own cultural works, but also to share ideas to emerge, for example, a system or social belief or ideology. These three types of environment move people to develop culture.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) states that the essential core of culture is ideas and values. Following the opinion, Masinambow (2004, p. 36—37) highlights that the adherents of the humanistic concept of culture emphasizes culture on the values and noble ideas that has to be achieved by human beings. Those values and noble ideas are referred as local wisdom in this study.

The local wisdom term referring to the local genius term was first proposed by Quaritch Wales in his study of the Southeast Asia history. The term means ‘the sum of the cultural characteristics of the which the vast majority have in common a people as a result of their experiences in early life’ (cited by Poespowardjo, 1986, p. 30). The definition contains ‘cultural characteristics’, which are as unlimited as the understanding of culture definition. However, in this study, the cultural characteristics features are limited to ‘the cultural characteristics in the form of ideas, values, ethics, methods and behaviors that contain the wisdom of a society and institutionalized traditionally’.

Language, Kaba Literature, and Coastal Communities Rites

Mother language used by the people in the coastal regions of West Sumatra is Minangkabau language, that is commonly called Minang language. It is also used by Minangkabau ethnic groups throughout the West Sumatra, even in neighboring provinces such as Riau, Jambi and part of Bengkulu. Minang language has several dialects such as Agam dialect, Payakumbuh dialect, and Pancung Soal dialect (Muko-Muko, Bengkulu). In Padang City and the South Coast District itself, people use Minang language with local dialects.

In terms of sound, Minang language is close to Malay language and does not differ much from Indonesian, for examples “bāb kaba?” (apakabar? ‘How are you?’ in Malay and Indonesian), “kabaelok” (kabarelok ‘good news’in Malay), and “terimokasih” (terimakasih ‘thank you’ in both Malay and Indonesian). The Minang language used in the fishermen community of Padang and the South Coast District does not differ from Minang language used by the people in general. Proverbs concerning the philosophy of fishing are also found in Minangkabau society, although some are more the sea oriented like lauik sati (magic sea), which represents the view that the ocean is sacred and must be preserved; when damaging the sea, the loss will come.

Called as the Minangkabau suburbs area, west coast of Sumatra has a distinct cultural heritage due to the orientation of the highlands, which is the center of the Minangkabau. In addition, similar to other west coast of Sumatra, lots of the history are intersect with traders from outside such as Malay, Aceh, Chinese, Indian, West Asian, Portuguese, English, and Dutch. This interface has left a unique culture and traditions. This can be observed by evidences of the literature, dances and music showing the mixture of Minangkabau culture itself as a result of foreign cultures influence coming from other areas. Coastal traditions are sometimes also found in other parts of the west coast of Sumatra, such as in the form of musical instrument fiddle in Aceh, Pariaman, and the South Coast, as well as Shia tradition tabuik in Pariaman and tabot in Bengkulu.

Minangkabau dance and music performances using fiddle perform the story of kaba. Kaba tale, folk tale and classic Minangkabau fairy tales are delivered both spoken and written. Kaba is delivered by akaba (the narrator) using Minang language, accompanied by the strains of fiddle music, even followed by dances. It contains philosophy of life, view of life and moral values to be conveyed to the audience. Fiddle is used both in darek and Minangkabau coastal areas. Therefore,
Fiddle is also considered as a way of delivering a dynamic oral tradition. Although it contains music and dances, the most important elements in a fiddle performance is the storytelling.

Another rite istulak bala (‘starting reinforcements’), which is held by the fishermen community along the coastal areas of West Sumatra. By conducting the tulakbala, fishermen believe that they can avoid the bad luck and disaster while catching fish. The tradition is also called as mambarsian Pasia (‘beach cleaning’) on the area of Surantih Nagari, Sutera Subdistrict, South Coast District because physically the tradition is also accompanied by the beach cleaning from rubbish caused by the daily activities of people around the beach.

Tulak Bala is held once a year by slaughtering a cow or buffalo. Seven days prior to the cow or buffalo slaughter, local community gather around the beach and read a religious sentences of syahadat together on every morning or afternoon. It takes place every day before the buffalo slaughter. Fishermen are also prohibited to fish for fourteen days, which is seven days before the slaughter and seven days after the slaughter. If there were any fisherman fishing, he would get fined in advance.

On the slaughtering day, people come rushing to the beach to watch the slaughtering process. Then the slaughtering is carried out. The cow or buffalo’s head is thrown into the sea, and the buffalo meat or beef then cooked and enjoyed by community together. Seven days elapsed from the slaughter day, fishermen are allowed to fish again.

Local Wisdom in Coastal Culture of the West Sumatra

In Minangkabau, life as fishermen who depend on the marine products is not apart from verbal expressions that reflect their activity as fishermen, namely (1) how they get at a point in the life of a fishermen, (2) how they life as fishermen, and (3) how their income from their livelihood as fishermen. Those things are reflected in the culture propositions which illustrate propositions that are collectively remembered.

The determination and courage of Minangkabau people is reflected in the expression Maaduunungjoparasai ‘trying for luck with the suffering life’. As a cultural symbol,
maaduuntungjoparasaian is divided into two propositions maaduuntung ‘trying for luck’ and joparasaian ‘with the suffering life’. In the first phase of interpretation, maaduuntung refers to the act to get profit. It represents ‘looking for a better living’. On the other hand, there is ‘gambling’ reference in the act of maaduuntung. People who do maaduuntung cannot assure whether they will achieve what they expect. Meanwhile, the interesting part is that maaduuntung term is contrary to joparasaian ‘with the suffering life’. Maaduuntung is not associated with the proposition ‘to get a lot of money’, for example, or ‘to meet the needs of self and family’, but instead with a negative proposition joparasaian. It begs the question: what is it exactly that wanted to be represented on the verbal expression. Why do people want to “try for luck” if they only experience “miserable life; sense of pain” as the result? The interpretation has to be continued, not only stops at the first stage of interpretation.

To get the essence of local wisdom for the proposition maaduuntungjoparasaian, joparasaian proposition is not seen as a negative thing, but a positive one. It becomes a kind of cultural metaphor. Jo parasaian does not refers literally to ‘suffering life’, but rather refers to the ‘challenge’. Of course, betting is a challenge. Betting does not care about winning or losing. Either winning or losing is a consequence of betting that is consciously realized. In relation to the population mobility of Minangkabau people, maaduuntung has another reference, i.e. ‘wander’. Equal to betting, to wander is to go to a new place to find a better life. The wanderers believe that they have to move to another place in order to get a better life even though they cannot assure the result. It becomes the consequence of what they do.

The moral values will appear if the interpretation is continued to the next stage of interpretation. Maaduuntungjoparasaian refer to the quality of ‘being bold to attempt changing the fate’. Maaduuntung action is a kind of brave action to take in order to change the fate with serious challenges (joparasaian). Courage in the attempt to change the fate is expressed in maaduuntungjoparasaian, which becomes the local wisdom essence of the proposition as well.

Another cultural proposition describing how fishermen live his profession as a fisherman is Lauik sati rantaubatuah ‘sacred sea, blessed wander’ As well as maaduuntungjoparasaian, lauik sati rantaubatuah becomes a cultural proposition in the fishermen live from time to time. Haji Jamaludin (50 years), a chief fisherman in Nagari Sand Nan Tigo, for example, expressed this proposition when explaining what was done by the fishermen when the “west season” arrives—it is the season when winds becomes strong, tides becomes high, so that fishermen cannot go fishing, or in other words, when the fish are difficult to catch. Then the Tuak Balais done as the effort to appreciate Lauik sati rantaubatuah.

Lauik sati rantaubatuah refers literally to ‘the sea is alive and has the power (magic) that cause all the wandering area gives blessings to humans (fishermen)’. Here the sea has been personified as a living creature that has power and be able to bring a fortune to anyone who migrates. There is unlimited wealth in the sea that can be harvested by anyone who desires marine products. The sea ecosystem has blended with the ocean itself that makes it equal to humans, even humans who have the power. As with the sea, migration land—in this case, coasts—brings the wanderers prosperity as blessing to them.

Thus, the essence of local wisdom contained in Lauik sati rantaubatuah is how fishermen must appreciate and respect the sea. The sea has provided livelihood for fishermen so that it needs to be protected. Marine richness must be preserved. Fishermen and the sea have mutualism symbiotic. Any carelessness towards the sea of fishermen results bad consequences for themselves. Catching fish must not exploit the fish. The bomb usage is strictly prohibited. Ships and boats operates obediently in their respective areas according to vessel size and zoning, where zone 1 is for the small boat, such as jariang boat, and zone 2 and 3 for larger boats, such as kapatondo and charts.

Conclusion
To reveal the coastal archipelago culture—as the strength of Nusantara coastal cultural society—is through language. Language usage can be seen in everyday life and ritual expression executed. Language is a work of culture that expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality. Language is not merely used as a communication tool, but also as “showcase” of the entire entity—like DNA from the owner of the language. With language, one can see the culture as a whole. By studying the language, including grammar, we learn the culture.

Language expressions about the sea found in the coastal sea of West Sumatra show that the sea is alive and has power. Thesea, as part of the wandering areas, gives blessings to humans (fishermen). The sea as the personification of a living thing can bring blessings to anyone who wanders to get a better life. Marine life has been united with humans and has symbolic power. Therefore, the sea—in this case, the coast—has power. The power owned by the sea gives grace to the fishermen.

The synergy between human (coastal communities) and nature (the sea) becomes a symbolic force that is hereditarily maintained. Giving respect to the sea, either through language and rite expressions, is a local wisdom which is still preserved until today in coastal areas of West Sumatra. The local knowledge then becomes a potential basis for the cultural values preservation and can be a learning model for other coastal areas.

References


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