Myths of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri on Sundanese Ethnic: Efforts to Reconstruct the Values of Environmental Conservation

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Abstract. The local Sundanese myth of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri is very well known in West Java, Indonesia. Originated from oral stories pass from generation to generation, the myth was then written in the manuscripts to preserve its existence. Many farmers in the countryside in West Java believed that Nyi Pohaci exists and protect their growing plants. Therefore, the farmers held a ritual ceremony to honor the figure. This article focuses on studying how the story of Nyi Pohaci is constructed to preserve the environment among Sundanese ethnic. The data are taken from the story of Nyi Pohaci in local Sundanese manuscripts including the literature review on the ceremonies. These documents were found strongly related to the myth of Nyi Pohaci in Sundanese ethnic who live in the countryside. This qualitative study was combining the philological theory proposed by Djamaris (2002) and the social construction theory proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) to explore the myths of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri regarding the environmental conservation in Sundanese ethnic. The results of this research show that the story of Nyi Pohaci has been constructed so well regarding ecological preservation by the Sundanese ethnic in the countryside of West Java, Indonesia.

Keywords: Myth, Sundanese society, construction, environmental conservation, manuscript.

1. Introduction

Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri (henceforth: NPSS) is a designation for the figure of Dewi Sri in the Sundanese ethnic in West Java, Indonesia. She considered as a guardian of rice in the Sundanese belief. Various important plants in the agrarian life of Sundanese, such as rice, Kawung (sugar palm), coconut, and tubers, are believed originated from her burial ground. Therefore, Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri honored by Sundanese farmers. The honor manifested in the form of various ceremonies to her. The ceremonies different held in every stage of rice cultivation starting from the seeding process, harvest, post-harvesting even until the crops delivered to storage of rice granary.

In the beginning, the myth of NPSS allegedly spread orally. However, in its existing developments, the myth is perpetuated in written form or manuscript by the Sundanese. This study preliminary observation manage to address NPSS figure in several Sundanese classical manuscripts, using old Sundanese language, believed its written in the 17th century. The manuscripts of Sewaka Darma (Kropak 408), Kawih Paningkes (Kropak 419), and Sri Ajnyana (Kropak 625) were the classical manuscript NPSS figure has been mentioned. In Sewaka Darma manuscript (Danasasmita, 1987), it is stated that above the heaven of Hindu Gods (Isora, Brahma, Mahadewa, Wisnu, Shiva) there is a heaven of Sari Dewata inhabited by Ni Dang Larang Nuwati, Wirumananggay, Pwah Langkawang Tidar, Pwah Sekar Dewata. On the level above, there is a heaven of Bungawari.
This is the place where the *Pwah Sanghyiang Sri, Pwah Naga Nagini* resides. Meanwhile, in *Kawih Paningkes* or *Kawih Panikis manuscripts* (Ayatrohaedi and Munawar Holil, 1995), some names of *Pohaci* are mentioned, namely *Pwah Sang Hyang Sri, Batari Sri Kala, Pwah Wirumananggay*, and *Dayang Tresnawati* [11].

In the manuscripts, from the late 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, the NPSS figure was placed in a longer story form. This figure became the main character in the story relating to the origin of the emergence of rice plants, tubers, sugar palm, and other plants that usually found in Sundanese society. The creation of the NPSS story and figure is interesting if regarding agricultural activities in Sundanese custom. The farmers in the countryside were found highly appreciated NPSS and believed that a story about NPSS does really exist. Furthermore, present research on manuscripts that contain the story of NPSS figure were found only focuses more on philological perspective; by making transliteration or presenting the text editing. Thus, this study also used the philological perspective in line with and the social construction theory to reveal how does the creator of the NPSS figure myth construct this story so that it is believed by Sundanese society in the countryside and Why was the myth of NPSS figure created?

2. Theories: Philological and Social Construction

This study uses the several local manuscripts as the primary data source. Moreover, to obtain the necessary data sources, the philological theory is applied. The sequence of philological working principles includes the manuscript inventory, the manuscript description, the comparison of manuscripts and texts, the selection of manuscripts to be edited, and text transliteration [7]. Also philological theory in line with the social construction theory was applied to find out how the story of the NPSS figure in the manuscripts was constructed by story creators and Sundanese society.

Social construction theory is proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in the book *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966). This theory exposed that reality is the creation of creative people through the power of social construction concerning the social world around it. Thus this study line of thinking sees that reality is socially constructed. This study believed social construction contains objective and subjective dimensions. In the objective dimension, there are two prominent media roles, namely institutionalization and legitimacy. Institutionalization arises when all human activities are experiencing a custom process. It means every act that is often repeated will ultimately become a pattern that can then be reproduced and understood by the doer as the intended pattern. Meanwhile, legitimacy produces new meanings which function to integrate the meanings that have been given to different institutional processes. The function of legitimacy is to make institutionalized objectivation available objectively and make sense subjectively. It can be said that legitimacy is not just a matter of values it also always implies knowledge.

3. Research Methods

This present study explored 10 Classical Sundanese manuscripts as the primary data source to study NPSS figure. Eight of the ten manuscripts about the story of NPSS figure are kept at Leiden University Library in the Netherlands, i.e. (a) *Mitologi* (Lor. 293); (b) *Nyi Puhaci Sanghyang Sri* (Lor. 7759 (Mal. 2411); (c) *Sulanjana* (Lor.7731); (d) *Wawacan Sulanjana* (Lor. 7612 (Mal.2568); (e) *Wawacan Sulanjana* (Lor. 7839 (Mal.2058); (f) *Wawacan Sulanjana* (Lor. 7851 (Mal.2070); (g) *Wawacan Sulanjana* (Lor. 7926 (Mal.2132); (h) *Wawacan Sulanjana* (Lor. 8633 (Mal. 3136). While, the other two manuscripts were kept in the National Library of Indonesia in Jakarta. Although the title slightly different and there are various stories in it as well, however, the core of the stories contained the same, it all mentioned about the figure NPSS alongside the origin and rice nurturing method. Moreover, the story of NPSS figure was found in three Sundanese manuscripts that use old Sundanese language and writing system, namely *Sewaka Darma* (Kropak 408), *Kawih Paningkes* (Kropak 419), and *Sri Ajnyana* (Kropak 625). Further, all the manuscripts documented through re-written or copied. *Katalog Naskah Sunda* (Ekadjati, 1988) and *Katalog Induk Naskah-Naskah Nusantara Jilid 5A: Jawa Barat Koleksi Lima Lembaga* (Ekadjati & Darsa, 1999), seems to be the Sundanese manuscripts that contain the story of NPSS figure more specifically.
Alongside, the main manuscripts, the other manuscript also revealed the character in a different setting, i.e., Nyi Pohaci, Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri, and (Wawacan) Sulanjana. All manuscripts that hold the story of NPSS figures are reviewed based on the working stages of the philology research. From the philological research stand, all manuscripts that contain text about NPSS were selected since it has the same storyline and core.

The manuscript then observed and revealed an interesting finding of the storyline and the role of NPSS figure in the later manuscripts which written in the later period. The data were also taken from several ceremonies documentation and observation which still conducted in several villages around West Java. The ceremonies were selected due to its strong relation to the myth of NPSS. The ceremonies are Seren Taun and Ngalaksa. The Ceremony of Seren Taun is a rice harvesting ceremony of Sundanese society that is held every year. While Sundanese Ngalaksa ceremony is a traditional ceremony as an expression of gratitude to the Almighty for the success of the harvest received by the society is called by [17] [18]. The ceremonies usually conducted in several Sundanese traditional villages, such as Ciptagelar, Sukabumi, Kampung Naga, Tasikmalaya, and Cigugur, Kuningan or in Sumedang.

These two types of data sources then analyzed using social construction theory to see the relations between the two types of data sources. Another point that needs to be mentioned here is the Interpretation step which also performed answers the research questions.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Story of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri

Analysis and comparison of the various manuscripts showed that the story of NPSS figure has many versions. However, in the new editions of the manuscripts that were written later, from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the story of NPSS can be briefly represented in the text of Wawacan Sulanjana.

The story of NPSS in the text of Wawacan Sulanjana presenting Nyi Pohaci as an adopted son of the God Guru, who came from the tears of the God Anta who rolled into an egg and was hatched by Goddess Uma the wife of the God Guru. She was told died at a young age in a tragic story. From her burial ground, a variety of trees suddenly grew: from her head grew a coconut tree, from her fingers grew rice plant, from her heart grew black, white and red sticky rice; from her right thigh grew thorns-bamboo; from her left thigh grew bamboo; from her tendons grow rattan; and from her genitals grew sugar palm tree. Then by the God Guru, the plant seeds were given to King Siliwangi to be planted in Pakuan. King Siliwangi then ordered his people to plant it around the Kingdom. After the abundant rice supply, the people Pakuan may eat it. The way to cook was taught by Goddess Nawangwulan, an angel who is married to King Siliwangi. That rice, one stalk was not last even consumed by a hundred people; didn’t need to be pounded or washed first. However, when cooking it, it must not be known by others.

The story was getting more interesting when the rice was already abundant, Dampu Awang came and wanted to buy rice. However, his request was rejected by King Siliwangi, because the rice was God’s entrusted goods. Dampu Awang was hurt and asked for help to Sapi Gumarang and his adopted children Sangkalabuat and Budugbasu to damage the rice plants (Sangkalabuat and Budugbasu are Nyi Pohaci’s brothers). But all his efforts were always thwarted by Sulanjana and his siblings, Talimendang and Talimenir (they are the children of Dewa Sang Weang). Their attacks in the form of west winds, east winds, beetle winds, red pests, white pests, yellow pests, etc. Rat pests can be defeated by summoning caterpillar-eating birds.

Finally, Sapi Gumarang and his two adopted children submitted and promised to keep the rice plants. Then at one time out of curiosity, King Siliwangi opened the steaming lid. Goddess Nawangwulan was shocked and sad because the rice that she planted did not want to become rice. He knew that King Siliwangi had opened the steamer lid. Goddess Nawangwulan sadly told King Siliwangi that the rice must be pounded and washed before cooking. Goddess Nawangwulan taught him how to do it, and then returned to heaven [13].
4.2 A Ceremony to Honor Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Sri

Sundanese ethnics have a series of celebrations and special ceremonies to honor NPSS. The Seren Taun ceremony, and Ngalaksa were the famous ceremonies. The Seren Taun ceremony is held annually by the Baduy (Kanekes) community, Ciptagelar Kasepuhan Banten Kidul, Kampung Naga, Tasikmalaya, and Cigugur, Kuningan, as well as various other Sundanese communities. It is said that this tradition has been conducted since the days of Kingdom Pajajaran. Meanwhile, the Ngalaksa ceremony which also held annually only can be found performed in Sumedang.

The Seren Taun ceremony begins with the glorification of NPSS, the rice goddess in the old Sundanese beliefs. The ceremony is conducted based on the Sunda calendar, which usually coincides with the end of January or the beginning of February in the Gregorian calendar. At this celebration, the Sundanese society sings some pantun (traditional poetry) or kidung (ballad) which are intended to invite NPSS to come to the earth and bless the rice seeds. This is intentionally conducted so that the farmers are healthy, and as a ceremony of ngaruwat or tolak bala; to protect from bad luck that might happen to the farmers.

Moreover, to honor NPSS, in harvesting the rice, traditional Sundanese farmers cannot use sickles or machetes. They must use ani-ani or ketam; a small knife that can be hidden in the palm. Sundanese society believes that NPSS is a soft and gentle soul and will be afraid to see big sharp tools such as sickles or machetes. Also, there is a belief that the rice that will be harvested is also the embodiment of the goddess. Therefore, it must be treated with honor and gently.

4.3 The Myth and the Construction of Environmental Conservation

This study believed that NPSS figure was created by creative Sundanese people in ancient days. Old Sundanese societies who are generally agrarian owe their life on agriculture results. Sundanese farmers have to go to the rice fields or gardens every day to cultivate the agricultural land. They are much attached to agriculture live and obtain results for their excellent behavior in their life. Moreover, their life routines in farming or gardening were expected being creative and concern about the agricultural land they are working on. The land they cultivate both rice fields and gardens are a very important part for them. It is like a heart for the Sundanese, if their heart is damaged then they will vanish.

The awareness of the importance of agricultural land as a very important asset for them then fosters creativity in that group of society. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) stated, the reality in which a group of people lives is the creation of creative people through the power of social construction towards the social world around them. The existence of ceremonies related to rice harvesting and the existence of texts in manuscripts about NPSS figure cannot be separated from the existence of creative humans who are trying to construct social conditions in their residence. Witnessing rice fields and gardens that are constantly exploited at all times will undoubtedly cause concern for creative Sundanese who lives in the countryside. The creative man will think ahead and worried that the land and the agricultural environment that became life for the Sundanese would someday no longer produce rice, tubers and other foodstuffs. That is why he thinks creatively to create a mythological figure like NPSS. The aim is clear, to preserve the environment in which the villagers of Sundanese societies owe their lives.

To construct a myth about the NPSS figure, the creative man carries out two media roles, namely institutionalization, and legitimacy. The Institutionalization is referring to the societies who live in the village which accustomed to performing ceremonies related to rice harvesting and are used to honor the NPSS figures. This process is carried out repeatedly so that it eventually becomes a pattern that can then be reproduced and understood by members of the society in the village. The important matter to see in this context is the combination between the organizing of ceremonies related to the rice harvest and the reproduction of manuscripts that contain the text of NPSS figure. While legitimacy through NPSS is important in the effort to make institutionalized objectivation available objectively and rationally subjective. As stated by Berger and Luckmann, legitimacy is not just a matter of values, but also always implies knowledge that can be understood by the society in villages.
Nevertheless, The emerging number of manuscripts that contain NPSS stories were found in the late 19th century into the beginning of the 20th century can be equated with the legitimacy of the ceremonies related to NPSS figure.

5. Conclusion

Beyond the story of NPSS figure which created by Sundanese in the ancient times showing that Sundanese people who lived in agricultural villages were a creative society. The creation of the character of NPSS will raise a serious concern to preserve their environmental as well as fears from the local, so they do not damage the nature. Environmental damage in the future would harm the society of the village itself because they are very dependent on agricultural production. The process of constructing the story of NPSS figures is undoubtedly through a long and gradual process. Moreover, an efforts to reconstruct the values of environmental conservation was believed in two stages that should be conducted so, i.e., the habituation stage, and the legitimacy stage.

The text in NPSS manuscripts contains the story of the origin of the emergence of rice and various other types of plants that commonly known by Sundanese society in the countryside. Nevertheless, the text regarding NPSS figure also contains the origin of the emergence of various types of plant pests which are also commonly found in rural Sundanese society. The analysis of text and assessing the context beyond the ceremonies regarding NPSS figures, it appears that the myth of the NPSS figure was carried out for a mission of environmental sustainability among Sundanese. Thus, this present study seeing a strong relationship between the presence of a homage ceremony toward NPSS figure and texts about NPSS figure. The myth about the NPSS figure was created to preserve the environmental sustainability of agriculture which is life for the farming Sundanese society who lives the countryside.

6. Acknowledgment

This work is supported by Hibah PITTA 2018 Funded by DRPM Universitas Indonesia No. 1978/UN2.R3.1/HKP.05.00/2018.

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