

Revitalization of local wisdoms: Is it possible?

Indonesia is rich in local wisdoms but they are fading with time, partly due to globalization and modernity.

An old adage saying *bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian* (get sick first, have fun afterward) was an exemplary principle of life rooted from local wisdoms. The adage implies a call to build a working ethos and boost spirit to achieve goals.

Principles of *gotong royong* (togetherness) and *toleransi* (tolerance) are other examples of cross-culture wisdom, which almost all cultures in Indonesia are familiar with, especially in relation to social and nature harmonization.

Particular ethnic groups residing in hinterland also have local wisdoms that guide them to maintain and preserve nature so that when it comes to utilization of timber, for example, they consume it in moderation instead of excessive and uncontrollable exploitation.

Blessed with many islands and ethnic groups, with each having their own culture, Indonesia is rich in local cultures that contain local wisdoms, frequently defined by experts as containing wisdoms of life.

Despite the absence of a special and comprehensive study on local wisdoms and their utilization in daily life, several experts have concluded based on their personal observations that local wisdoms that serve as sources of virtues have increasingly faded, partly due to globalization and modernization.

"Factually we can see how local cultures teeming with wisdom and philosophy of life are almost no longer implemented in daily life practices, which are increasingly pragmatic," said Suyono Suyatno of the Language Development Institution at the Culture and Education Ministry, on kemendikbud.go.id.

He cited rampant corruption at almost all levels as tangible evidence of the denial of local wisdom that teaches, *bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian* and *hemat pangkal kaya* (thrifty is the cause of being rich).

Suyono attributes the waning use of local wisdoms to globalization, which promotes an increasingly pragmatic and consumptive lifestyle.

"The frequently occurring acts of violence have reduced the value of tolerance," he said, citing another example of denial of local wisdoms.

According to him, people are inclined to become increasingly pragmatic, "money" culture-oriented and trapped by being consumptive.

In the context of today's Indonesia, he said, "It can be said that local wisdoms we possess resemble heirlooms, which we inherit from our ancestors. We store and maintain them but we do not put them into practice in real life and take the heirlooms in vain in responding to

challenges of the changing times," he said.

Art critic and cultural issues writer Agus Dermawan T. said the younger generation's lack of concern for local wisdoms was caused by two factors. First, "because they do not know of the local wisdoms, and should they know, they will ask, 'will the local wisdom correspond to modern times?'"

"This is the problem. Schools no longer teach local wisdoms," said Agus.

Post-modernism

According to him, the world community had reminded for three decades of the importance of local wisdoms, a vital part of local culture through the discourse of postmodernism.

The discourse reiterates that "modernism" which always carries "universalism" (moreover, when found that modernism was dominated by Western culture), no longer matches endeavors to revive human culture, which is heterogeneous in nature, according to Agus.

The postmodernism discourse invites all nations to go back to locality. "That way, local wisdoms are reread, restudied, reunderstood and repracticed," he told *The Jakarta Post*.

"The people [of Indonesia] will understand that the philosophical teachings of Ki Ageng Suryomen-



Retained local wisdom: Villagers of Pattotongan village, Maros regency, Makassar, South Sulawesi, continue to adopt the principle of *gotong royong* (togetherness), in building a house.

taram, in terms of depth, are comparable to those of J. Krishnamurti, John Locke or Albert Camus."

According to him, Indonesia's cultural roots had become the subject of study of cultural experts around the world.

"However, following the entry of Western people in the 19th century has led to the birth of Westernization," he said.

"The Westernization is then managed awkwardly by our people, who are spiritually local and traditional. This has led us to becoming an awkward people in the international scene because by desire, we want to follow Western culture but spiritually we are traditional," the art critic further said.

"For example, our high-ranking

officials lack self-confidence if they do not speak English when delivering a speech overseas, whereas the French, Japanese, Koreans, Hungarians always use their respective languages and their local wisdoms everywhere they go," he said.

A leader from Java that understands local values will certainly use the philosophy of *laku alam* (nature behavior) to guide them in life. "This can be elaborated as: A leader should be aware of what they do or why they behave so," he said.

He cited an adage, *laku hambeging candra* (imitate the behavior of a moon). "This means that a leader should illuminate like a shining moon," he said.

Amid the increasingly fading local wisdoms, Indonesia still witnesses

the practices of local wisdoms, such as the one related to the medical world. "Herbal medicine, a legacy from our ancestors in the medical area, have been developed and perfected to meet pharmaceutical standards," he said, adding, "that's one of the local wisdoms that people have revitalized."

According to Suyono revitalizing local wisdoms are crucial to respond to various acute issues facing the nation and the country, such as corruption, poverty and social disparity. But this will only run well provided that there is supporting policy and role models.

"Without these, local wisdoms will only become meaningless cultural accessories," he said. **(Sudibyo M. Wiradji)**

Building sustainable and self-reliant tourism

Bank Mandiri and the British Council, in collaboration with the local government and communities, have developed community-based tourism in diving destination Wakatobi, with the culture of Bajo Mola community introduced as a complementary attraction.

Reviving nearly extinct cultural legacies in archipelagic and culturally diverse Indonesia is worth considering when it comes to tourism development.

The revitalized ancient cultural legacies commonly contain local wisdom, which can be included in a tourist package that provides a "magnet" that can undoubtedly attract more tourist arrivals.

Local wisdom taking the form of values, norms, ethics, beliefs, customs, indigenous laws and special regulations contain virtues that serve as guiding principles for the life of the communities.

Following the implementation of regional autonomy, regencies and mayoralities have their own authority to develop their regions, with several of them having far-sighted views by unearthing fading ancient cultures to keep them alive.

Hugua, regent of Wakatobi, Southeast Sulawesi, for example, has created an old culture and local wisdom-friendly climate as he believes reviving local wisdom will allow communities to have their own character and identity.

"Development in a broad sense should lead people to have spiritual and emotional maturity, which they take from local wisdom. This way development has an aim," he said in a recent phone interview.

Wakatobi, located in a quiet remote island in eastern Indonesia, has long been recognized among divers as one of the world's best dive sites as it offers a high diversity of coral, rich in marine life. Its name is an acronym of the four main islands: Wangi-Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia and Binongko. The park has been listed as a World Heritage Site since 2005.

Alongside diving, Wakatobi has introduced culture-based tourism, with the Bajo Mola community, who used to be sea nomads, taking center stage in local tourism development.

"Local wisdom and values-based emotional and spiritual maturity

will lead to a region having a charisma that will, in turn, draw people to come," Hugua reasoned.

In developing community-based tourism, he said, his administration could not work alone as it required expertise, experience, capable resources, funds and other relevant aspects and therefore, he welcomed collaboration with Bank Mandiri and the British Council under the Mandiri Bersama Mandiri Sustainable Tourism Program (MBM-PB).

The collaboration established in 2013 allowed local communities to demonstrate their capability to participate in tourism development under local wisdom and resource-based value systems, which led to the birth of Lepa Mola (Mola Tourism Board), Hugua said.

Lepa Mola is a social enterprise aimed at managing local tourism potential and reinvesting majority (65 percent) of the profits for the benefit of the community.

Meanwhile, Lepa Mola's head Samran described the challenges facing the community in reviving cultural legacies, "efforts have to be made to gather the surviving elderly figures to collect information on the almost forgotten Bajo culture. There are only a few surviving elderly people who have authentic information on ancient culture," he said.

Samran said that under the MBM Sustainable Tourism program, the collected information on Bajo culture was presented in a workshop involving various stakeholders, including local figures, to discuss the authenticity of the legacy prior to being compiled in a written document.

He cited *duata* as one of the examples of a revived local cultural legacy. *Duata* is the Bajo ethnic group's way of treating a severely ill member of the community, who cannot be cured through other methods, including medical approaches.

The ritual procession is presented in the form of a dance



Revived dance: *Duata*, one of the examples of a revived local cultural legacy in Mola village, Wakatobi regency, Southeast Sulawesi. The dance depicts local traditional ways of healing handed down from their ancestors.

depicting local traditional ways of healing handed down from their ancestors. "It has become a special treat for visitors, whether they are visiting ministers or tourists alike," Samran said.

Value-added tourism

Local culture-based tourism has successfully complemented diving and snorkeling, Wakatobi's major tourist attraction.

"We try to tap the tourists who visit Wakatobi to extend and to tap the 24-hour period that people have after diving to enjoy the Bajo experience and celebrate their holiday with the Bajo," said Ari Sutanti, senior program manager of the British Council Indonesia.

"After diving you have to wait 24 hours before you are allowed to fly for medical reasons. This way we are trying to maximize the experience of tourists coming to Wakatobi, give added value to the tourism in Wakatobi that is mainly focused on diving and snorkeling and introducing tourism that focuses on the culture of the Bajo people.

"This way, we are not at all competing with the tourism businesses in the area that mainly promote the richness of Wakatobi's seas, but rather, adding value to this through collaboration," she explained.

According to Ari, the program aims to build sustainable and self-

reliant tourism, ensuring that the Bajo community are the principle actors in managing their assets and that they engage directly with tourists without intermediaries, providing tour guides.

"We designed the program, facilitated the process and developed an approach to work with the community, the private sector and local government to stimulate community participation and engagement. We are developing the capacity of communities in five villages in the area.

The program introduces creative and productive activities in the tourism sector to increase communities' capacity to manage tourism potential and income to stimulate village economic development," she said.

Thanks to the collaboration, a jointly developed tourism package is available for tourists. With the package, tourists can visit and learn about the authentic Bajo experience, including dolphin watching and enjoying sunrise; Bajo cultural walking tours; canoeing and watching sunset and fishing with fishermen; enjoying traditional Bajo cuisine and star-watching at night, all guided by Bajo people.

For Bank Mandiri the culture-based tourism development is in parallel with the bank's vision of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in which the Mandiri Community

Pillar, one of its three pillars, is based on "our care and heeds community development in one region by taking advantage of local wisdom and potential, which will lead to people's self-reliance economically and improved prosperity."

"We present the MBM-PB as our community empowerment program in a tourism and culture-oriented region," said Rohan Hafas, senior vice president of corporate secretary PT Bank Mandiri (Persero) Tbk.

The culture that has been handed down from one generation to another is an essential element in forming the specific character of a community.

"Therefore, the cultural legacies have to be retained, appreciated and presented in a good package so as to make it relevant to the changing times," Rohan says.

"In the tourism sector, the cultural uniqueness and local wisdom especially that related to the maritime area can, surely,

add value to Mola Village's tourist appeal," it said.

The community-based tourism development, with Mola Bajo culture as an additional treat, has managed to increase the number of tourist arrivals in Mola, Wakatobi as a whole over the last several years.

Data from Wakatobi tourism office shows that tourist arrivals amounted to 17,000 in 2014, a sharp increase from 1,500 in 2006.

Tourism management

Lepa Mola head Samran said the MBM program had greatly benefited local communities, especially when it came to tourism management because they gained knowledge through training and workshops that they attended under the program.

"In terms of business, it has allowed them to explore the potential creativity in producing handicrafts. Several groups of fishermen produce marine catch-based handicrafts and waste plastics-based bags as souvenirs," he said.

"People were not prosperous and now they can gain extra income. Many were unemployed but now the number of unemployed has reduced because they run their own businesses," he explained about the impact of the program.

"Also following the Bajo cultural information campaign, more young people are already familiar with the culture," he said.

Regent Hugua hailed the program as having a long-term impact in which local communities' mindsets were tuned into local wisdom-based tourism development, which, he said, was well structured and sustainable in nature.

The program has raised awareness among the youth that they possess a priceless heritage that they can unearth and take advantage of so as to allow them to find their self-identity.

"The presence of Bank Mandiri and the British Council is a good facilitator of the actualization and revival of local culture," said Wakatobi tourism office head Nadar. **(Sudibyo M. Wiradji)**

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