

**CULTURAL CONTESTATION IN RITUAL FOOD :
AMERICAN THANKSGIVING AND JAVANESE *SLAMETAN***

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Abstract

Cultural contestation is inevitable issue related to fundamental questions of collective identity. Localism, nationalism and globalism is being questioned as the globalized world enable culture experiences transformation and shifting which may endanger identity . This paper is going to explore how cultural contestation in defining identity also happens in food consumption. Ritual food of American Thanksgiving and Javanese *Slametan* witness that American and Javanese identity is fluid.

Keyword: identity, culture, Thanksgiving, *Slametan*.

Introduction

As part of the basic daily needs, food is viewed no more than just the source of human energy. Its benefit is to make people move and think for their survival, so that without food, men will not be able to continue their life. When it comes to the broader context that daily needs create a certain mode of production, determine relational aspect, food is no longer seen merely as primary needs with physical and functional benefits.

The pattern of food consumption in this modern era strengthens what the old proverb said “you are what you eat”. If a decade ago, you ate a plate of rice and now you eat a plate of vegetable salad without rice, it represents many meaningful aspects. The consumers may say that to keep a good health status, rice diet must be done wisely or to adapt with the newest trend of environmental

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perspective consuming vegetable is to address global sustainability. Yet, the main point that food has transformed is an inevitable idea.

One of the transformations is that food constructs and maintains identity in which it fulfills symbolic roles. Rice which symbolizes commonness does not suit anymore when its consumers reach certain social status and that to fulfill the status, part of certain group of people he should abandoned rice from his menu. The casual construction of meaning when seeing the disappearance of rice in the plate above draws our attention that consuming or not consuming rice communicates a meaning.

Other symbolic roles of food which also transforms is ritual food. Ritual food means food which is served as part of ritual moments in a given cultural background. Behind the serving of ritual food lies social and cultural identity of its society which handed down from generation to generation. This paper is going to expose cultural contestation in ritual food by taking American and Javanese culinary rites- that is Thanksgiving and *Slametan*- to see through the constructing and maintaining cultural identity in those two different cultures.

American Thanksgiving

If an American is asked what most celebrated tradition they hold apart of Christmas, the answer is surely Thanksgiving. As a moment of feast in American tradition, Thanksgiving could not be separated from its historical setting. There are many versions which clarifies the first Thanksgiving celebration, yet the date finally refers to the event in Plymouth (now Massachusetts) in 1621 when the first settlers held a harvest feast to celebrate the good years of planting. The survival of those settlers as American history recorded was assisted by Wampanoag tribe who showed them how to grow corn and hunting animals.

The first celebration of Thanksgiving was observed nothing more than just a harvest feast, yet the moments was captured as a symbol of reconciliation and solidarity especially between the pilgrims and the Indians, the whites and the reds. Nelson in his book *Our Pilgrims Forefather: Thanksgiving Studies* (1910) says :

Wishing to show their good will and to help with the Thanksgiving feast, the Indian guests went into the woods and killed for the table five deer and much other game. As the Pilgrims had not yet become skilled enough hunters to get much large game, they were very grateful for this present from their friends.

About ninety Indians came their chief. They stayed for three days. The time was passed in wrestling, shooting at marks and in other sports. By the time the party is over there was a better feeling between the reds and the whites, and it seemed that they might afterward live in peace (p.27).

The description of harvest feast of Thanksgiving is also exposed by the writing of William Bradford, the Governor of Plymouth, in his writing about pilgrims Of Plymouth Plantation:

They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which is place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck a meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports (Morison, 1956:90)

Having study its historical setting, therefore food served in Thanksgiving celebration usually covers turkey- as venison is harder to find- and other harvested stuff like corn and pumpkin. Today, the way how Americans enjoy the meal in this occasion has already transformed from communal societal activities in pre colonial era to familial domestic event. Thanksgiving is done by holding family dinner gathering in which all the members would love to come. Due to this habit, therefore Thanksgiving refers to the home coming celebration, the moment Americans meet their family and having family reunion. The celebration is

usually started by listening to each other's gratefulness upon their life before crafting the turkey, the icon of the Thanksgiving ritual food.

Javanese Slametan

Ritual food also comes to existence among Javanese through *Slametan*. From the stand point of etymology, *Slametan* comes from the word *slamet* which means safe, trouble-free, scatheless. *Slametan* is the manifestation of Javanese religiosity as they believe that welfare in life can be reached only through the balance of physical and mental world, the material and immaterial being. To get the approval from the immaterial being, Javanese people place *sesajen* in certain time and place to keep the spirit guard them. In accordance to this ritual, Magnis Suseno (1991) in his book *Etika Jawa* proclaims that all is done to get *selamet*, to get safety in life. The supranatural aspects has already been tamed and domesticated so that they can do their works without obstruction.

Slametan as the most significant rite is almost held in every important moments in Javanese culture and society, for example in pregnancy, baby birth, circumcision, marriage, funeral, harvest season, house warming and even when they got career promotion. In short, Magnis Suseno claims, every opportunities should be able to guarantee that there is a balance of nature in it. Furthermore, Koentjaraningrat divides two kinds of *slametan*:

Saya berpendapat bahwa upacara *slametan* yang bersifat keramat adalah upacara *slametan* dimana orang atau orang-orang yang mengadakannya merasakan getaran emosi keramat, terutama pada waktu menentukan diadakannya slametan itu, tetapi juga pada waktu upacara sedanag berjalan.... Upacara *slametan* yang tidak bersifat keagamaan adalah upacara yang tidak menimbulkan getaran emosi keagamaan pada orang-orang yang mengadakan *slametan* itu, maupun orang-orang yang hadir, walaupun pada *slametan* itu telah diminta hadir seorang pegawai keagamaan untuk membacakan doa... (1984:347)

The quotation shows that in its development, there are *Slametan* which contains sacred and holy aspects and slametan which does not deal with religious or spiritual aspects at all. Koentjaraningrat puts magical and emotional feeling as the categorical parameter to differentiate holy and casual *Slametan*. Apart of its

distinction, the philosophical ideas of *Slametan* to Javanese is to keep the harmony of the nature for human being is part of the nature.

As part of oral tradition, ritual food in Slametan is preserved generation to generation. According to Yana MH in *Falsafah dan Pandangan Hidup Orang Jawa*, the meal served in Javanese ritual food is different based on three main occasion for Javanese people; that is birth, marriage and death. Preparation for having a baby is started by *Slametan* called Mitoni, followed by *Lahiran*, *Selapanan* and *Tedhak Siten*. *Slametan* can be done every weton (the day when Javanese was born according to Javanese calendar) and in preparation before holding marriage ceremony such as *Pasang Tarub*, *Siraman*, *Midodareni*, *Akad Nikah* and *Ngundhuh Mantu*. At the end of Javanese life, *Slametan* still witnesses the procession in form of *Geblak*, *Pitung Dinan*, *Nyatus*, *Pendhak Pisan*, *Pendhak Pindo* and finally *Nyewu*.

The meal in Javanese ritual food includes *nasi tumpeng* (rice cone) with red chilli and red onion on its top, *nasi gudhangan*, *nasi golong*, *nasi gurih* with black soybean, five types of porridge, *jajan pasar*, banana, *kemenyan*, *kembang setaman*, *ingkung ayam* (one whole chicken which has been cooked with traditional recipe), *apem* (pancake). The meal may vary according to the events, it may be added or reduced.

Food as Contested Identity

Ritual food in American Thanksgiving and Javanese *Slametan* shows that food is not merely a cultural tradition, but it is also a social marker which exercised in social practices. Cultural tradition has shaped the mode of consumption in certain events, so that consuming ritual food cannot be seen as only an individual action. Food consumption therefore is a meaningful symbol of identity.

Observing American Thanksgiving and Javanese *Slametan* in the postmodern cultural era, ritual food is experiencing different shifting of symbols and meaning. In broader context, Thanksgiving represents similar symbol and meaning of reconciliation, though it is in different scale of reconciliation-that in

American pre colonial times reconciled the race of people and in its modern version it reunifies the family members. And through the contestation of local culture, Thanksgiving encounters different culinary expression in which today many Americans welcome in giving regional product, recipe and seasonings on their Thanksgiving table. It stays as a local phenomenon as it tries to connect with local harvest and specialty foods. In other words, Thanksgiving menu has been modified into what American would like to eat and what they have to eat. Modification of ritual Thanksgiving food exemplifies the constructive process of cultural product without changing the universal symbol and meaning.

Javanese *Slametan* witnesses different experience as the main ritual food has changed through times. Sri Suwarti, the owner of homemade Javanese catering at Kadipiro Solo, reports that nowadays her customers prefer to buy cake and bakery at bakery shop instead of ordering the traditional ritual food as what she usually cooked two decades ago. In 1990s she could get more than 5 orders in a week to cook for *Selapanan* (a celebration after 35 days of delivering a baby) or *Nyatus* (one hundred days after the funeral). Today, the number is declining into 2 orders in a week or even no order at all. She adds that the choice done by her customers is inevitable today as modern era provides many easiness providing replacement for traditional food ceremony. Her expression is seemingly in line with Alan Warde said in his book *Consumption Food and Taste* :

...there has been decline in the spirit of 'discipline' in the sphere of consumption (e.g. Bell, 1976; Martin, 1981; Lasch, 1978). This might be described as a process of informalization (see Wonters, 1986) wherein rigid, conformist, established and routinized patterns of consumption dissolve. Free rein is thus given to personal as moral, aesthetic and social standards are relaxed, so behavior becomes irregular. Often attributed to the cultural revolution of 1960s, informalization is discerned in dress, manners and social disciplines surrounding eating (1997: 3)

The replacement of Javanese ritual food signifies that informalization takes place within Javanese society. The *Slametan* meals shift and change as Javanese people also change their perspective upon traditional myth and symbol. In this case the process of deconstructing the Javanese identity is going on within the society- ritual food produces identity, identity is shaped though ritual food

consumption. Informalization upon ritual food constructs how Javanese identity in modern times- fluid and adaptive.

Conclusion

Ritual food carries with it the historical and symbolical relation of its consumers, therefore the preservation of ritual food means the preservation of identity. Through ritual food, society builds collective identity to which it binds them together, revealing solidarity and marking as 'ours'. In cultural contestation perspective where identity becomes a fundamental question, the preservation of ritual food may assist to answer the question about Javanese identity, just like the old proverb says 'you are what you eat'

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