

## The Meaning of “Tetek Melek” as a Media of “Tolak Balak Pagebluk” of Covid-19 in the Culture of Tulungagung Society

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### ABSTRACT

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The plague of Covid-19 is currently still a world concern. So some time ago the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that Covid-19 was a pandemic. Not only Covid-19 currently endemic, it turns out that the Java region has also experienced a number of plagues that were considered deadly at that time. Apart from endemic plagues, the Java Island has also experienced a pandemic plague. Javanese people have their own way of warding off the occurrence of this plague. *Tolak balak* through *Tetek Melek* is believed to be able to ward off plague, so the purpose of this study is to find out the meaning of symbols of *Tetek Melek* as a media of *Tolak Balak Pagebluk* covid 19 in the culture of Tulungagung society that should be preserved. The research uses qualitative method. The data in this study are the results of interviews with informants and the actions of the perpetrators of *Tetek Melek*. The data collection method in this study is by in-depth interviews and observations in the South of Tulungagung area. The results showed that *Tetek Melek* is an inheritance from their ancestors which is still practiced by some people of Tulungagung. It is rich in symbols and meanings that need to be preserved as a heritage from ancestors. In addition, it means an effort to reject the dangers of Covid.

**Keywords:** The meaning of symbol, *Tetek Melek*, *Tolak Balak*, Covid-19

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The plague of Covid-19 is currently still a world concern. So some time ago the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that Covid-19 was a pandemic. Not only Covid-19 currently endemic, it turns out that the Java region has also experienced a number of plagues that were considered deadly at that time. Apart from endemic plagues, the Java Island has also experienced a pandemic plague. Since the 18th century, a number of pandemics such as smallpox, malaria, bubonic plague and cholera have killed millions of Javanese. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Covid-19 pandemic has made restless again. Java Island is the island with the highest positive cases of Corona in Indonesia.

Among the panic and worry due to the spread of the covid-19 virus in Indonesia, a number of community groups work together to prevent and reduce the spread of the virus. Various efforts were made, starting from spraying in the neighborhood, distributing free masks, and isolating yourself at home for 14 days as recommended by the government.

Tulungagung residents associate the plague of covid-19 virus as a *pagebluk* that is troubling the community. So it causes them to carry out the tradition of *tolak balak* from generation to generation to ward off the spread of the *pagebluk*. The *Tolak Bala* ceremony is a form

of village healing ritual, which is a symbolic behavior or action as a form of expression of their souls in establishing vertical relationships with the inhabitants of the supernatural world (Gustiranto & Tantoro, 2017). The ritual of *tolak balak* for the people of Riau is defined as a ritual to make peace with nature which is a way to achieve a peaceful life, safe and prosperous (Hasbullah, Toyo, & Pawi, 2017).

Even though humans are in a very advanced and sophisticated era, this method is not completely abandoned by some groups of society. One of the traditions of *tolak balak* that is still developing in Java is the tradition of *Larung Sesaji Kelud* in Sugihwaras Village, Ngancar District, Kediri Regency. *Larung Sesaji Kelud* is a traditional ritual in the crater of Mount Kelud. This traditional ceremony is held every Suro month (Javanese calendar). *Larung Sesaji* was intended to reject the Lembu Suro that was tricked by Dewi Kilisuci. In addition, this sacred ritual is a form of gratitude to the ruling god, and also a form of respect for the rulers of Mount Kelud (Huda, Bajari, Muhtadi, & Rahmat, 2017).

As has been stated on several online news portals, many places in Java have carried out the "tolak - balak" ritual as a preventive to overcome the "pageblug". One of them is the news delivered by detikNews.com (accessed on June 29, 2020), namely the ritual of saving the earth at ancestral graves, namely at the Tambangsari grave and

the Lastana grave site carried out by residents of Lemahbangkulon Village, Singojuruh District, Banyuwangi as a submarine ritual of rejecting logs in efforts to ward off disease, especially the Corona virus (covid-19). Different thing is done by residents of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Some residents prepare special dishes that are believed to be able to ward off the Corona virus outbreak, which is in the form of “seven-colored lodeh vegetables” which are considered part of the Javanese tradition (Gatra.com, accessed on June 29, 2020).

Similar to what is done in some of these areas, the people of Tulungagung are familiar with the ritual of putting *tetek melek* in their homes. Some people who still believe in local culture in warding off disease plague put up statues or pictorial objects called '*tetek melek*' in Javanese in front of their homes. In addition, *tetek melek* is also installed on the Pendopo of Tulungagung Regency. "*Tetek Melek*" is objects depicted with sinister faces believed to be an antidote to disease plague. The installation of this mask made of coconut midrib is a form of request to the rulers of nature so that the virus does not come to homes. Initially, *tetek melek* are coconut fronds which are drawn on the face using charcoal and lime. During its development, the picture on *tetek melek* has changed with a more varied image. Although basically still shows a scary face.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study used a qualitative method, namely by observing deeply the culture of the Tulungagung community in *tetek melek* installers in front of each house. This observation will produce structured descriptive data. So, the purpose of this qualitative research is to describe the empirical reality behind the phenomenon in depth and completely. Therefore, the use of a qualitative approach in this research is to match the empirical reality with the prevailing theory (Moleong, 2003: 3). The data in this study are the results of interviews with informants and the actions of the perpetrators of literate breast fitting. The data collection method in this study is by in-depth interviews and observations in the South Tulungagung area.

Informants in this study are people who are accustomed to providing information about the situation and background conditions of the research (Moeleong, 2003: 97). Informants are people who really know the problem to be researched. The informant in this study is Mr. Supani (81), he is one of the residents in South Tulungagung who participated in the installation of *tetek melek*.

The data collection instruments are in the form of interview guidelines, recording devices, cameras, and notebooks. Using qualitative methods allows researchers to organize, critique, and clarify interesting data. So, qualitative research directs researchers to get unexpected and new discoveries to build a theoretical framework (Endraswara, 2003: 14-15).

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Tetek Melek in Tulungagung

The installation of "tetek literacy" is a belief that has been passed down from generation to generation and it is still being practiced by some residents of South Tulungagung. On closer inspection, the *tetek melek* painting is almost the same as the *ogoh-ogoh* paraded by the Balinese Hindu community before Nyepi Day. *Ogoh-ogoh* is a large doll that has a face and shape like a giant with a creepy face (Diatmika, 2019). The painting of *tetek melek* is also depicted as an ugly creature sticking out its tongue. However, one interesting form is in the form of *ogoh-ogoh* and creepy but full of artistic nuances (Widnyani, 2012).

*Tetek melek* is a painting mask made from the base of coconut leaves or the Javanese call it "bongkok". The image on the coconut midrib is an image that resembles the face of a person who has a creepy character. In the past, literacy breast images were made using *enjet gamping* (whitewash) and black color from *silite dandang* (black bottom of dandang). For *tetek melek* coloring, there must be white and black colors, for the meaning of these colors there is no special meaning. The use of these dyes is because people used to find it difficult to find paint. So, there is no specific message regarding the origin of the material for coloring, whether it can affect the function of literacy or not because nowadays it is modern so it is felt that the use of paint to color literacy is not a problem. As expressed by Mr. Supani as follows:

*"For example, it can do in black paint, just to color it resembles a person's drawing"*. (Interview with Supani, Juni 2020)

According to the belief of the community around the tradition of installing *tetek melek*, it has been done since the time of their ancestors. At that time *tetek melek* was used as an antidote to disease plague or the community called it *pagebluk*.

*"If there is a big disaster, many sick people are told to make things like this"*. (Interview with Supani, Juni 2020)

The installation of *tetek melek* is a symbol that *pagebluk* is back. The installation of literate breasts in front of the house is believed to be able to protect the occupants of the house from *pagebluk*, this is done because it has become a habit that is carried out repeatedly accompanied by likes and tendencies of the heart towards it (Santalia, 2011: 30-31). As currently, the existence of Covid-19, the community is reminded of the old situation, namely when the disease outbreak attacked the Tulungagung residents carried out the ritual of installing these literate breasts. It is intended to act as an antidote, repel reinforcements, and drive the plague away.

*"The message from our ancestor is only for tulak, tulak can be interpreted as war, for example, if the*

*goods arrive and then they are fended off, they will definitely return*". (Interview with Supani, Juni 2020)

So the installation of *tetek melek* can be interpreted as an effort to persist or reject or fight against the Covid-19 virus. In its manufacture, *tetek melek* cannot be done carelessly; there must be a ritual before its manufacture. Ritual is a way or method of making a custom holy. Ritual creates and maintains myths, as well as social and religious customs, because ritual is a religion in action (Dhavamony, 1995: 167). The ritual here means the reading of prayers which the term is "*jopo to coro*". *Jopo to coro* comes from the Javanese language which contains a request for safety. This is a message or message of knowledge for safety from elder teachers (Interview with Supani, June 2020).

### **The Meaning of Tetek Melek Symbols as Tolak Balak**

The tradition of "tetek melek" developed for the first time in Tulungagung. It is not clear when and who first triggered it, clearly that the mask of *tetek melek* is like the Dwarapala statue found in every corner of the city of Tulungagung. The statue is located on either side of the road from the direction of the wind when entering the city of Tulungagung. Like "tetek melek", this statue is also a symbol which means guarding. Symbols are signs that are used for certain ritual purposes (Indrawan, 1999: 259).

The Javanese are indeed famous for their various symbols. They are the type of person who always says behind hidden meanings. The use of symbols in its cultural form is actually carried out with full awareness, understanding, and high appreciation, and is adopted from generation to generation which has been preserved until today. The understanding or school of thought that is fundamental to the symbol is called symbolism (Kholiq, 2012: 29-30). The symbolism is none other than a means of moral, social communication and cultural hegemony. These symbols exist not only in "tetek melek" but in many other media which Javanese still believe to this day.

Based on the philosophy of literacy, it is derived from two syllables, namely *tetek* and *melek*. According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (2008) *Tetek* or *teteg* means tough, while *melek* means alert. In Tulungagung the term "tetek melek" is taken from the art of *jaranan*. *Tetek melek* is a picture of a head painting that makes everyone feel afraid if this *tetek melek* goes berserk. And currently *tetek melek* is used as an antidote to Covid 19, which the Tulungagung people believe to date. This is a descending effort according to the Tulungagung community when *pagebluk* occurs.

*Pagebluk* was an extraordinary event that had happened to the tulungagung community, namely smallpox and was mass-based at that time, according to the results of the interview about *tetek melek* that was made by their ancestors to get rid of the smallpox *pagebluk* at that time. They are installed next to their home or the border of the gate at the entrance and in locations that are prone to happen, such as public places, namely markets and public service offices.

As it is well known, *tetek melek* is the art of painting on a hunchback or *cumplung* which is *clonehi* (painted) resembling a picture of a person and sometimes also given a leaf. There is no size limit for *tetek melek*. After being given the prayers, *tetek melek* was installed in front of the house of each resident. The place where the *tetek melek* are placed is beside the entrance or entrance gate of the house whether it is to the right or left of the door, which is important to be outside the house. For example, the house is facing north, then the breast is placed next to the front door of the house and faces north. Facing everywhere is not a problem (Interview with Supani, June 2020). Tulungagung residents started putting up literacy when the Covid-19 plague began to spread and caused unrest. So there is no limit on installation or release for *tetek melek*, if *pagebluk* has finished or conditions have improved and the plague has disappeared then *tetek melek* can be removed. As stated by Mr. Supani as follows: "*the point is that after every disaster, the war is safe, yes, all of them are released separately.*" (Interview with Supani, Juni 2020).

The sacred definition that exists in "tetek melek" during the Covid 19 pandemic period, according to Eliade 2002, is what is considered supernatural, extraordinary and important. This is according to the belief in certain societies which contain values which are considered to have mystical and religious powers outside the world so that they are never to be violated.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

*Tetek melek* is a painting mask made from the base of a coconut leaf "bongkok". The image on the coconut midrib is an image that resembles the face of a person who has a creepy character. In the past, literacy breast images were made using limestone energy (whitewash) and black color from *silite dandang* (black bottom of dandang). In Tulungagung the mention of *tetek melek* is taken from the art of *jaranan*. For the place where the *tetek melek* are placed next to the entrance or entrance gate of the house whether it is to the right or left of the door, the important thing is to be outside the house. The people of Tulungagung started to become literate when the Covid-19 plague began to spread and caused unrest. So there is no installation or release limit for *tetek melek*, if the *pagebluk* has been completed or the conditions have improved and the plague has disappeared, then *tetek melek* can be removed.

Based on the explanation above, *tetek melek* is an inheritance from their ancestors which is still practiced by some Tulungagung residents. It is rich in symbols and meanings that need to be preserved as a legacy from ancestors.

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