An Ancient Local Wisdom in Indonesia as a Power to Treating People Affected by Leprosy in Social Way

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Abstract

This preliminary research is intended to explain how the construction of Indonesia’s local wisdom is able to solve problems faced by lepers. In order to understand leprosy in Indonesia, we need to also understand the people’s awareness of their territory. This refers to the popular myth that leprosy is a curse from God. The myth is already buried into the minds of most Indonesians, and the fact that local wisdom has a role in solving the lepers’ suffering is particularly unique. This research explains this further by comparing solutions implemented by the Batak and Javanese peoples. Batak people uses spiritual rituals, while the Javanese uses religious rituals thanks to the spread of Islam. This research explains how local wisdom influences the treatment of lepers within a social community.

Key Words: local wisdom, lepraes, society, empowering, stigmatization
1. Introduction

Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by Mycobacterium leprae which damages skin, peripheral nerves, and other tissues, except brain. It disfigures eyes, fingers, legs, and other organs\(^1\). This disease has affected humanity since over 2000 years ago. People often assumed leprosy as a hereditary disease caused by curse, magic, or food, but it is not true. Humans contracted leprosy through infection. It causes various complex problems, i.e. medical, social, economical, cultural, security, and national security. There is stigma and discrimination from the society regarding leprosy. In its treatment, people, including hospital staffs, tend to feel scared to shake hands with or even touch lepers.

Lepers tend to group with themselves in order to avoid negative view from society. Leper rehabilitation centres are usually located in remote places, like Donorojo (Jepara) near the beaches of Jepara, 12 km from Jepara-Pati Main Road, Central Java. Long distance and broken infrastructure are the reasons why people are not able to get good public services. Nevertheless, there are some urban rehabilitation centres like the one in Sitanala (Tangerang) and Jongaya (Makassar), but unfortunately, the condition is pretty much deteriorating and they lack funding. Society at large also strongly discriminates lepers who live in those rehabilitation centres. This shows that there is inequality in social welfare distribution throughout leper rehabilitation centres.

The highly negative societal attitude on lepers makes them deeply concerned when they want to integrate with society. It also makes them want to stay in the leper colony\(^2\). Therefore, leprosy also affects them personally and socially. In this case, lepers are exiled from home because their families are feared of also being exiled by association. Society tends to stay away from families whose members with leprosy are living with them. If there is a member of family contracting leprosy, the whole family will face difficulties socially and economically. They are unable to work and mingle with their neighbours because of that widespread stigma\(^3\).

In order to understand leprosy in Indonesia, we need to see its distinct territorial awareness on the treatment. This refers to how leprosy is perceived as a divine curse. The myth unwittingly dominates Indonesia’s national psyche. Thus the point of treating this disease is now forgotten by most Indonesians.

In this paper, we are using different perspectives regarding the treatment of lepers in Indonesia. We correlate them with local perception or tradition in treating lepers. In this case, cultural forces throughout Indonesia play a role in the treatment of lepers in the country.


\(^3\) Ibid. p. 100
Therefore, we are not only assessing the situation based on behavioural elements, but also conceptual elements and social understanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Stigmatisation

The treatment of lepers within the society faces stigmatisation. From that stigmatisation, negative views appeared and was accepted by society. Their perception is then shaped by a belief that strayed from the original purpose of treating lepers. Lepers are then designated as an outcast group. Although there is no psychological impact on persons with leprosy, stigmas such as that leprosy is a sexually transmitted disease, a witchcraft, or divine punishment forced lepers to view themselves as persons who had committed serious crimes.4

According to a research by Hannah Lesshafft et. al about the stigmatisation of lepers in Brazil,5 there still are lepers who are discriminated and barred from further social participation. This is the legacy of Brazilian government policy during the 1920s when lepers were forcibly isolated in certain colonies, one of which is Centro de Convivência Antônio Diogo (CCAD) in northeast Brazil. Until 1982, leper quarantine centres created healthy and sick quarters which separated visitors from patients like a prison.6 In 2007, this leprosarium was turned into a residential area for persons with leprosy and their families so they can mingle with people around the area. There is also a programme for outgoing patients in CCAD.7 Based on participation limit indicator, stigmatisation of lepers are proven to be true.

Erving Goffman (1963) defined stigmatisation as a process which ends with a reduction of chance of living because individuals have limited opportunities to be involved in social participation within a community. Reflecting on Goffman’s view about the reduction of chance of living, stigma also involves labelling and stereotyping by connecting label as a unwanted characteristic in a society which then evolves into a stereotype8. In Brazil’s case, CCAD leprosarium had already turned into a residential area like any other areas. But the label “former leper hospital” and “former leper” has a negative meaning and give rise to the belief that there will always be negative reactions when someone touches a leper. This negative meaning is related to lepers who experience physical deformation and make them stand out from normal people in general, such as loss of limbs, amputation, and blindness.9 The label sticks and the lepers face subjective judgments. They are therefore denied and barred from joining society (Goffman, 1963).

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5 Hannah Lesshafft et.al, Perceived social restriction in leprosy-affected inhabitants of a former leprosy colony in Northeast Brazil. Lepr Rev. 2010.
6 Ibid. pp. 70
7 Ibid.
9 Hannah Lesshafft. op.cit. p. 76
CCAD is labeled as “former leper hospital”, and it contributed to a stigma faced by the succeeding social system outside CCAD. In this case, leprosarium which is often called “miniature cities” has its own infrastructure and planned residential community.10 Goffman (1961) in Lesshaaft described that when social bond had been built between the inhabitants of total institutions, which in this case are CCAD or other leper institutions, the institutions themselves are expected to become a place that accepts persons with leprosy and provides emotional backing. When a former CCAD patient left the residential area, they were regarded as a social outcast and cannot apply for jobs or experiencing social mobility, and this is not determined by the physical changes suffered by lepers. This research shows that societal perception and its stigmatisation of persons with leprosy are deeply embedded so that inconvenience or unrest inside the “normal society” outside CCAD becomes an important point. When joining society after being isolated in a “total institution”, the lepers have to be accepted as normal persons because they will adjust themselves with the established society. Through the existence of stigmatizing labels like “former leper hospital or “former leper”, societal perspectives upon lepers become a danger for their social scope.11

2.2 Local Wisdom

As a country with a diverse display of ethnicity, race, and religion, Indonesia comes into play as a place with numerous traditions where tribes turned into local communities and live in the same region. Boonpanya (2006) explained that local society in this case is traditional society with its own culture, and they create a self-sufficient miniature with a production system, resource management, healthcare, knowledge and learning, justice, government, and economic system between individuals and families within the community. These people in the local community are related to one another and continue the legacies of their families. Values become an important aspect and strong foundation for a community to take action. Values that are held in a local community are collectively called local wisdom.

The existence of local wisdom in a local community can be viewed as a sign that local culture has a force that instills a unique character into that community. From an etymological standpoint, wisdom in “local wisdom” means a person’s ability to use their thought to take action or behave as a result of assessments on many things, objects, and events (Ridwan, 2007: 27). If compared with local aspect which in this case is a set of values, the concept of local wisdom becomes a way to create a pattern of relations inside a social environment and makes a traditional society’s local cultural values much more important. Keraf (2010: 369) also addressed that local wisdom is every knowledge, belief, understanding, and customs or ethics that guide human behaviour in an ecological community. Local wisdom is not only related to the tribal knowledge and understanding about humanity and how to build peaceful

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
relations with each other, but also to knowledge, understanding, and customs regarding
human, nature, and how every relation between the inhabitants of this ecological community
is built. All of these traditional wisdoms are learnt, practiced, taught, and passed down
through generations and shaped human behaviour in their daily lives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

How did the construction of local identity in Indonesia solve the problem of leprosy?

3.2 Data

3.2.1 History of Leprosy in Indonesia

From the ancient times until 1830s, diseases were prevented by changing human behaviour
through laws, culture, and religious doctrines. Segregation is the main strategy of controlling
the spread of leprosy at that time. Moses Law stated that diseases, including leprosy, are
divine punishment for humanity’s sins and crimes. Consecration ceremony and four sacrifices
had to be done before the leper can return to society. Before modern times, Indonesia had
isolated lepers. The island of Madura back then was known as a leper colony. The largest
number of lepers came from Madura alone, which at one time reached 3,153 people. 35
percent of lepers in East Java were from Madura. Sumenep Regency had higher number of
cases than Sampang Regency. Leper rehabilitation had been done before Indonesia’s
independence, but this leads to the stigma faced by lepers in modern times. Lepers were
isolated to prevent the spread of the disease. This kind of segregation between sick and
healthy people needs to be done in order to protect the healthy ones throughout the kingdom.

3.2.2 Leprosy Treatment in Local Communities

For the Batak people, sickness is a condition when a person who suffers from it rests in
bed and gets cured by traditional methods or shamans. They use ancient healing methods to
open the way to reach their Creator so that human can stay healthy and far from all sorts of
perils. According to them, in addition to natural diseases, there are also supernatural diseases,
such as swollen eyes which is caused by harmful behaviour; this can be cured by smearing
betel extract on their eyes. If there is a person who suffered leprosy, that person is assumed to
have received curse from the ancestors and exiled from society. In Batak tradition, persons
with leprosy are considered as punished by God. This belief is the basis of a mystical way of
treating lepers, e.g. bathing in a mineral spring with therapeutic flowers, having traditional
herbal drinks. After that, the lepers claimed that they are more confident and ready to undergo
medical treatment and join society. Lepers who did those things are claimed to be appearing
shinier and charismatic in full moon.

12 http://dokudok.com/daftar-penyakit/sejarah-kusta-stigma-sosial/
13 http://www.beritasatu.com/kesehatan/355420-penderita-kusta-di-provinsi-jatim-tertinggi-di-
indonesia.html
The Javanese are not so much different from the Bataks. Leprosy there is still seen as a divine punishment. According to their tradition, “healthy” is the balance of physical and mental conditions. In fact, everything revolves around the mind. This belief is encapsulated as “batin karep ragu nututi”, which means that the body will follow what the mind dictates. Healthy in this case is akin to sane. If someone is able to do their daily social roles, such as working in the fields and having the desire to continue living, the person is healthy (sane). Children can be deemed healthy if they have strong appetite and always eager to play. To determine the causes of a disease, there are two concepts, personalistic and naturalistic. In naturalistic concept, disease is caused by supernatural beings (gods and spirits), things that are not humans (ghosts, ancient spirits, evil spirits) and humans (witch, shaman). The disease is named “ora lumrah” or “ora sabaene” (unusual). The treatment is based on supernatural knowledge, such as ceremony and offerings, to cleanse their sins. The Javanese are influenced by religious teachings when asking for recovery from their Creator. Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia, especially among the Javanese. This impacted their behaviours such as shalawat (praises to the Prophet Muhammad), Quran recital, and others. After saying their prayers to God, they feel more peaceful and ready to live normally.

4. Results and Discussion

Leprosy treatment is like the shape of an iceberg. The visible results are fewer than the invisible or unreported ones. This is caused by stigma from the society. Indonesia is shaped by thousands of tribes and ethnicities with their own tradition according to the prevailing local wisdom. By putting an emphasis on preliminary research regarding leprosy treatment in Indonesia, based on the collected data, we found two aspects in relation to it: (1) Treating leprosy by empowering the colony; (2) Treating leprosy by empowering society or normal people in general. Normally, because of their condition, third world countries are unable to maximize resources and services in sectors like healthcare, education, and life standards of persons with leprosy. We aware that by tracing back its history, Indonesia already has unique measures to treat leprosy. From both Javanese and Batak peoples, we can conclude that there is stigmatisation buried deep within society’s psyche towards persons with leprosy and we can empower them at the same time. In Brazil’s case, empowering leper colonies fails to deliver positive treatment for the patients.14 There needs to be a new paradigm about leprosy and local wisdom. The prevailing understanding in Indonesia about spiritual and “heretical” things cannot be defined as some sort of logical fallacy. Local wisdom is the ability of that local community to harness their minds to act and behave towards the result of their assessment on lepers (Ridwan, 2007). This particular aspect needs to be addressed in developing a society. Leprosy itself has not been solved yet within the medical community.

14 Hannah Lesshafft. op.cit.
There has to be binding cultural forces, and therefore, they need to create patterns to formulate alternative perspectives from the development of society in relation to normalising the lives of lepers and healthy people. Furthermore, according to Talcot Parson (1975), society can be called society when they could find a common ground. After that, they undergo certain processes. Society exists when there is an established system. Humans developed a kind of relation that is intended to produce things that eliminate super ego in our mind.

Aside from Indonesia, India, particularly Anandapuram, has been trying to develop alternative perspective in relation to societal empowerment in order to be more integrated with persons contracting leprosy. The same perspective is trying to eliminate the dichotomy of Anandapuram ki lopala (inside Anandapuram) and Anandapuram ki bayata (outside Anandapuram), where there is no social compulsion to hide the lepers’ flaws in public areas. When getting groceries in local market, for example, there is no need to make them appear distinctive. People are then trying to protect them within the social scope of community. Reflecting on India’s experience, we hope that this research becomes the basis of the alternative development of local wisdom in treating leprosy in Indonesia.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Leprosy has been viewed as a special disease in every culture since the dawn of time. Leprosy is also seen as a divine punishment because the person who suffered from it committed sinful acts, which creates a stigma that persons with leprosy are a sinful group of people with malicious characteristics. In Indonesian culture, leprosy is well known and its treatment is well established. Local wisdom does not only see the leper’s physical condition, but also their mental condition, so the treatment focused on both physical and mental conditions. They developed mental problems because of stigmas and discriminations within their community.

In Indonesia, especially within Batak people, the lepers are treated using traditional and mystical ways. Lepers among Batak people conduct rituals like bathing in a pond which is believed to give them strength to face their adversity. After the ritual, the leper should feel more welcomed by society. The Javanese people has a different solution. Javanese method of treating lepers is influenced by the dominating religion in the island, Islam. This makes the treatment full of religious rituals, such as praying and hoping that God will heal the person suffering from leprosy.

There has to be more attention directed towards alternative perspectives regarding the treatment of leprosy with the established local wisdoms. Treating lepers does not only

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16 Ibid. p. 15
empower communities, but also enhance synergy between members of the community themselves.

References


