POLITICS OF MEANING AS A TOOL OF
CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS ON INDONESIAN'S RIOTS

Alitupu Villagers' Responses towards Poso Riots on Central Sulawesi[1]

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Abstract

Some riots in Indonesia are politically constructed as ethnical- and religious-based riots. This paper's hypothesis is, that the politics of meaning has been used as a tool to interpret causes, processes, and implications of the riots. Cultural view, which expressed emotionally on ethnical and religious identities, generouses realities into a simple one, such as differs "us" or "them" just based on ethnical and religious identities. Paradoxically, although people (villagers) really know that the generalization and simplification views blurred the real cause and process of riots, they are not able to leave it back. Interpretation towards riots was kept structurally by bureaucracy line and press papers. The people, at the end, responses the politics of meaning by constructing common enemies that were not real and not able to be tested, such as provocateurs, and informal communist movement. They also constructs an idea that their community were safe and proofed from the riot risk. At a radical point, they constructs an idea that an absolute truth of religions were not able to be experienced by people, so that no absolute evidences could build religious arguments.

The post New Order era from 1998 becomes a big cultural laboratory, where we are able to examine most of cultural hypotheses on Indonesians. The reformation era –alias the post New Order era—has unlocked the Pandora box and excluded most of all of cultural convergent and divergent factors on the rapid socio-cultural change. It is interesting that most of Indonesians –at least looked at the newspapers' headlines—have been electing the cultural factors as tools to be used as basis of viewing, interpreting, and valuing on the rapid change of Indonesia. The culture has been put in "the bottom of our heart", like "id" concept on Freud psychoanalysis, and close to

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be a "human instinct". Big pressure outside like reformation movement broke their world. The people take out the bottom factors, so that they look the phenomenon in a "natural way". It impresses them, and step by step reforms their world. Until now, then, politics on Indonesia is able to be analyzed by politics of meaning approach (Agusta, 2001).

Looking back, difficulties on examining cultural factors on the last three decades on New Order era related to officers pattern on putting the factors into the Pandora box, then locked it and guarded by military personnel. The pattern of avoiding the cultural problem, but thinking that the problem were not exist, was based on a paradigm on harmony. Practiced by the Javanese, when they were angry with their neighbor (the problem), for example, then they were not talking with others and considered that the others were nothing even if they were facing each other in some places.

When the cultural factor was used to explain at a national context, it was used to manipulate the hierarchical social reality into a homogenous one. For example, the former President Soeharto used phrase *saudara-saudara sebangsa dan setanah air* (My people who are fellow nationals) to avoided the real socio-economic hierarchy, even avoided lack of economic level of the poor from the haves.

Without aware on hierarchy, cultural category becomes a very wide bracket. For instance, someone belongs to the Javanese ethnic, either he stays in Solo as a central for developing Javanese culture or in Cilacap where has never been colonialized by Javanese Kingdom. It implicate on loosing grasping capacity of the lowest social stratum to participate in create a cultural core. There is a subculture concept, but, base on an assumption that some sub culture in a same culture have same cultural core, this concept is too wide also to address someone and is not able to construct a hierarchy among cultural entities –except a differentiation among them. The category, then, can be said as a simplification of a complex reality. In a rapid cultural sense, the category also simplifies the complex problems. In dangerous way, it looses a chance for the cultural victims to rehabilitate themselves. Unfortunately this phenomenon still exists –or is strengthening—until now.

Mean while, parallel with some preparations towards local autonomous era, cultural category also associates with local belonging. The origins are interpreted as "the truth owner" of local resources. Actually this logics is used by local elites to get the decentralized power in term of autonomous era. On the (next) context on local autonomous era, it becomes important to explore relationship between national hegemonic pressure and local cultural core responses. Local people developed their cultural counter by themselves, or helped by private sectors and NGOs. This dialectic needs a study on both the local cultural core and local cultural strategy.

Unfortunately the simplification trait on the cultural categories and its relation with local belonging sense has been used in, or at least interpreted as causes of, some Indonesian riots in Aceh, Kalimantan Barat, Kalimantan Timur, Sulawesi Tengah, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara Barat. The cause was addressed into cultural entities of ethnics, rage, and religions. Relationship among all of recent cultural factors of change in Indonesian above creates a hypothese, that the politics of meaning has been used as a tool to interpret causes, processes, and implications of the riots.

Politics of Meaning within Interpretivism

Cultural core or cultural paradigm become an important concept that bases the concept of politics of meaning in Geertzian tradition. The cultural core draws the deepest view or a cultural paradigm of local people, that presses the people and directs their actions (Geertz, 1965). It is static and hard to be changed for a long term. I implicates that the cultural core gives a boundary where the people were able to response the change outside and to adapt the change into their culture. Once we find the core, then we can predict the local responses towards local and national rapid change.

Politics of meaning shows usage of local or national cultural symbols –most of them is manipulated language—as power to manage people. People accept the symbols voluntarily, so that the symbol create their value and behavior. An important topics of politics of meaning is ideology as a metaphor (Geertz, 1973; Anderson, 1990, 1972; Latif and Ibrahim, *eds.,*1996). In a flash view, interpreted as the purest origins, the elites are legitimated to construct the politics of meaning, to value and to examine political events. Holding the opinion that most of local cultural cores are constructed by the elites, patterns on politics of meaning are able to be gained, eventhough this phenomenon may close the people chance to participate constructing the politics of meaning.

Politics of meaning aims to understand the use of ideology in order to get power. This cultural approach give deeper understanding about political institution more than politics. Actions of an individual as a political actor are related on his interpretation towards his surrounding. In Marxian point of view, ideology is practical. Its view forget to search how ideology is institutionalized by local people. Many researchers have showed the importance of politics of meaning in Indonesia. For instance, Indonesian is manipulated so far so that it does not correspond to realities.

The politics of meaning is different from a hegemony concept. Within hegemony, the people tends to loose their consciousness. The state ideology press their mind, and finally they responses think that the state ideology is correct and single real entity. As hegemony is done frequently, without critical consciousness the people accept everything from the power.

If hegemony shows powerless of the poor, this research will show that politics of meaning will mentions that as well as cultural strategy of the lower to respond the upper ideology, an advantage from starting point of politics of meaning is getting the active side of communities' culture. By understanding reality from local people point of view, it is easy to look at how the local people create a social meaning, press the meaning to others, and an implication on social conflict. That's why politics of meaning not only mentions a passive side of culture as showed on cultural core, but also emerging an active side on local cultural strategies.

To gain data from the local people point of view, I use a qualitative method. For researchers, choosing a research method are based on their scientific paradigm. The method in this article is developed within interpretive approach –not constructivism. The constructivism approach at least involve an assumption that every people may construct their each actions. Its assumption is difficult to be implemented in Indonesian (agricultural) communities, where group ties are still powerful to direct the people actions. In the qualitative method, a case study strategy is used in

this research. The interpretive approach, on the contrary, assume that individual actions are based on a cultural paradigm on a community. Beside fit in Indonesian community above, the approach also opens a chance to sum up and predict the actions within the community.

Lessons learned from a limited but a deep understanding case. It could be, because the case is used not only to be drawn to understand the case itself, but also to understand the wider and greater context (Geertz, 1965; Stake, 1995). Otherwise, there is some limited conditions: *first*, magnitude of understanding the case is limited by discourse of the context and the theoretical problem themselves. *Second*, the instrumental case may only explain parts of culture of the community or society. Imagining the chime curve on quantitative method, the instrumental case may only understand the negative part of the community, or the positive part of it, or the "central" part of it. Result of studying a case on the negative part, for example, is to critic a program. Meanwhile, the study on the positive part may be used to get lessons learned from the case or to build recommendation to solve the problem. Most of the social researchers usually choose the "central part" of the case to explain the common action of the people. *Third*, the social reality is a complex one (Hardiman, 1993) so that the researcher is only able to conclude and to get learn within corridor of the context of the case.[2] *Fourth*, eventhough comparing some cases may widen magnitude of the analysis, but the categorical data may only be analyzed at nominal or ordinal level –which statistically result of them would not be predictable well. Nevertheless, we are able to do a reflective approach, using a case to reflect another cases (Geertz, 1995).

Fifth, eventhough in Geertzian tradition improvement on interpretive approach does not depend on testing the relationship between the cases, but on smooth argumentation to improve the fit of the researcher's interpretation and the respondents' motives, unfortunately the tradition assume on superiority of the researcher towards the respondents. I think thick description technique of Geertz can be interpreted as an effort to get the most important or the deepest thing of the community, so that the researcher is able to understand the community life and explain it to others. Its result implication on Geertzian tradition, however, is different from Marxian tradition. The Geerztian tradition reaches cultural paradigm or cultural core of the community, while the Marxian tradition gets material items as the prime mover. At a more technical side, thick description is implemented as a detail description of a social event, such as a long quotation in an article about culture. This quotation becomes important in order to explain local concept as been thought by local people. Unfortunately, Geertz thought that the researcher has an authority to construct and then to conclude the interpretation on the respondents' reality (Geertz, 1988). As an author, the researcher get the respondents' reality from the community.

In order to construct a theory as well as keeping the reality belongs the respondents, it is interesting to compare approaches of interpretive, critical theory, and postmodernism. All of them try to empathy to respondents. Nevertheless, the postmodernism approach seems more practical. It mentions little narrations among the local people. Unfortunately its arguments to deconstruct

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[2] On the contrary, if we assume that the reality is a dicotomic one, based on an identity principle in math, we were sure that learning a part of community bring us to understand an opposite part of it by reversing the nature of the factors influencing the case actions. For example, by reversing the factors of impoverishment, we could get factors for alleviating poverty.

great narrations and emerge little narrations seem disperse, so that will be difficult to construct a theory on them.

Meanwhile, the critical theory bases its arguments on higher level of grand of social theories or, sometimes, at a philosophical level, so that its systematization is significant. The philosophical area is needed to direct the social movement. Further more, based on a complex reality assumption above, critics on and deconstructing the former theory implicate on creating the real new theory or arguments. It is difficult to take a critical theory into local reality.

Being put among two approaches above, interpretive, of course, will not used just to describe local community, but use it as an instrument to gain the local data in order to examine other theories as well as to construct a new theory. Interpretive have a chance to understand local meaning on social events, because the approach tends to give an empathy to the local people. There would be a problem when the researcher construct local description in a location outside from the local community –one out of solutions towards this problem is using reflective approach.

Cultural context –as involves in a big culture concept—has exist for a long time, so that data of it should be too much. Difficulties on finding critically, selecting the data, and, finally, constructing the context, emerge because a researcher become a part of the researched community or society. This research is supported by Nud.Ist Vivo qualitative computer program. The program saves time 18 multiple faster at the whole than by manually. N-Vivo retrieved, examined, and built theories from qualitative data on grasping details of people opinion and their nuances as social contexts. Otherwise, N-Vivo is still a luxurious qualitative program in Indonesia as developing country. It is very expensive to buy, and it needs expensive and sophisticated computer set – especially to spend a lot of hard disc's and RAM's memory as well as using "Pentium"—to run the program faster. As novel and rare computer program, among social scientists in Indonesia, N-Vivo creates myths of reducing data too much, changing a qualitative research to be a quantitative research, and more difficult than doing qualitative analysis manually.

Alitupu People Responses towards Poso Riots

Many riots on Indonesia looks like an instrument to test some hypotheses on intercultural relationship. The riots break people's former reality, then makes them confused. The riots, however, need rehabilitation of their world view. All of this process of breaking and rehabilitating involves many cultural actions.

There are two patterns on Poso riot, at least until now. *First*, efforts to solve the problem are not enough, as indicated by delaying to catch the prime cause of the riot. Commanders of invaders have been caught, brought into a court, and, finally, get a dead punishment. The people, however, is still worried and thinks that the truth provocateur is still free. Series of the Poso riots from 1998 to 2001 –included the latest riot a few weeks ago—are caught as a prove of the worriesness.

Second, the riots are able to be localized around Poso only. Eventhough towns and villages outside Poso have similar characteristics that were potentially able to break riots as indicated on having serious economic gap, plurality on religiosity, and corruption of local bureaucrats, the riots have not spread to other locations. Pre-riots are always begun by spread of issues that

persuade the people to attack other ethnical members and other religious believers. To respond it, Alitupu villagers, like other many villagers, are on their villages' guard. In front of the village, they selected visitors, or, actually, filtered issues. They also formed a communication forum between different religious believers. The forum decided practical things based on plurality of religious believers.

Alitupu Village location around Lore Lindu National Park –four hours from Palu to North side— is an area for local migrants as well as migrants came from Southside and Northside of Sulawesi, even from other islands. Local migrations run in a synergic way, create an acculturation, so that they did not cause conflicts.[3] Cultural conflict, however, occures when the migrants have a more powerful cultural identities. The power may be created and supported by national regulation on a transmigration program, military personnel, and policies of local bureaucracy. Within a politics of meaning area of analysis, the local officers press the people to interpret the migrants as national development agents. By using the cultural power above, these migrants need not adapting their own culture and roles with local culture –actually they almost definitely do not build a process of accomodation with local people.

On the local context above, the reformation movement since 1998 looks like getting the causes of the Poso riots out of their Pandora box. Alitupu villagers soon use cultural categories to simplify the complex social conflicts. We must note an important role of press in constructing and converging mass interpretation on the riots. Supported by sophisticated technology, the press spreads news and opinions very fast. Unfortunately, there is only little columns to express the broader opinion or describing complexity of social events. The press, then, simplify the complexity of factors become a just cultural-based factor. The riots are simply looked at as a conflict between Moslem-Bugiser and Christian-local-people. This meaning worries the villagers, especially the migrants. Village head, even, prohibited his people from reading newspaper and watching television of news rubric. He ensured that the news created the people imagination on dangerous of the village. Actually almost all of the Bugisers –one third of total villagers—moved out of the village at least for two weeks. Some people has not been back.

One important indicator involved in the cultural category is an economical gap between local people and migrants. There are many migrants, but at least since a century ago Alitupu villagers has been creating a relationship with the Bugisers closer than other ethnical members. The Bugisers become merchants, buying local agricultural commodities or retailing many things in the village. There many ethnics and sub-ethnics in South Sulawesi, but the villagers simply call them as Bugisers. Culturing commodities in a subsistence way makes the villagers neglecting to enter monetary economics. Then, when they have been entering the modern economic system since mids of 1990s, they have a lack on capital and tactics on a business strategy. Widening magnitude of their experience, the villagers imagine thet the Poso people sees riots as a tool to break dependency of economical culture above.

Another important characteristics within the cultural category is a rivalry among believers. Protestant religion has been professed by local people since a century ago, even lesser on some places, at the time of a Dutch colonialism. Before the colonial era, local people professed local religions. Unfortunately, the Protestant (also Islam) were soread in a repression way, and,

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[3] Several local ethnics, however, have their myths that other certain ethnics were their enemies.

especially for the Protestant, related into colonial authoritarian. This pattern of repression is continued by Japanese at their colonial era, even has been practiced by the local military-biased government since 1945. A turning point to a smooth action on a religious mission has been created since a mid of 1990s. Unfortunately, the new approach have not been established when the riots were broken.

Simplifying the complex reality, the cultural category is not able to direct us to gain the provocateur –a term accords to an individual or a group that creates the riots. Cultural category which is constructed in a simplest way is not able to be a thinking frame to direct us to find the deepest cause(s) of riots series. The provocateur nominators were found among young drunker. They have been watched tighter. Another provocateur nominators were a religious leader who usually announce badness of other religions and other believers. This religious leaders, however, have move out of the villages when the riot was broke in Palu last year. Aware on difficulties on finding the truth provocateur(s), the people develops a common and abstract enemy. For instance they mention a bad guy, communist people, many ex PRRI/Permesta and DI/TII rebellion guards.

By using politics of meaning, we see that the people need a new enemies to be attacked. Eventhough they believe that the riots are not emerged naturally, but caused by certain groups, they have not been finding the truth provocateur. Paradoxically, although villagers really knew that the generalization and simplification views blurred the real cause and process of riots, they did not able to leave it back.

Interpretation towards riots was kept structurally by bureaucracy line and press papers. The people, at the end, responses the politics of meaning by constructing common enemies that were not real and not able to be tested, such as provocateurs, and informal communist movement. They also constructed an idea that their community were safe and proofed from the riot risk. At a radical point, they constructed an idea that an absolute truth of religions were not able to be experienced by people, so that no absolute evidences could build religious arguments.

Learning from other riots in Indonesia, the people of Central Sulawesi have developed self-help actions. As they think that cultural factors drive the riots, their actions basically are responding the retrogressive change in a cultural way. The villagers creates some patterns of politics of meaning. When local culture has more powerful, its culture need not be integrated into the new culture. On the contrary, when culture from outside is more powerful, local people force to leave their original culture. Unfortunately, the arbitrary actions break the local people's own word. They face difficulties to interpret many stranger events into their unite view.

Limited on the local issue, there looks like a missing link among several factors interpreted as causes of the Poso riots, i.e. a local political rivalry factor. This factor has never been investigated. Before the Poso riot on 1998, a candidate for local government head has threatened to break a riot if he will not have been elected to be the principal. Several hours after his threaten and his fail on getting the position, the Poso riot phase I was broken. It makes sense that the local bureaucrats have too much fund to pay attackers on a riot. Corruption and nepotism in Central Sulawesi run on a large scale, especially for some fames of the elites (Aditjondro, 2000; Sangaji, 2000). Besides, there are cliques on Poso based on myth of rivalry among ethnics groups. Officers from Alitupu Village or Napu Valley face difficulties to improve their position in Poso. A century ago, before the colonial era, the Napu people robed the people in Poso frequently.

Politics of Meaning Re-interpreted

Eventhough the cultural core makes us able to predict the local responses towards local and national rapid change, an analysis on the cultural core only could grasp a narrow view on the local capacity on changing themselves –even changing the cultural core. That's why we need to study the cultural strategy also. The cultural strategy pictures the people activities on managing their opinions and personality in order to response change from outside and to refine their own culture. Here we see the active side of the culture (Kleden, 1987). Dialectic between national hegemonic strategy and local cultural strategy could construct a parallel or, on the contrary, a hierarchical relationship. Parallel relationships could form a tolerance or an adaptation. In hierarchical relationship, however, there would be great tradition that subordinated little tradition. As experienced in the New Order era, national and centralized development has been a great tradition facing local culture as a little tradition. The national policy almost usually manipulate local culture into a national campaign, restrained the local cultural evolution, and made cultural involution on local people. The local people thmenselves, however, could construct a counter culture to against national hegemony and to make their own evolution.

After looking deeper, however, the people of Alitupu Village also move to build their own politics of meaning to responses the elite sub culture at the village, sub-district, and district level. It may form on a wide area as a support for elite subculture, a cultural deconstruction, or a counter culture.

Actually, at least in my research experience, the villagers usually understand about their position among others. They also aware on the politics of meaning: "who says what". The same phrases may have a different meaning. It depends on each social stratum's interest. They know that the politics on meaning has been used to blurred the truth factor of Poso riots. On the contrary, awareness of the local people of the politicking using cultural symbol become a guarantee to create a deepest relationship between ethnic groups, creating a cultural adaptation, and a compromise within cultural boundaries. The culture may construct the real alternative of solving the riot problem, because it gives a set of meaning for the people to feel their existence on the world ("feel at home"). This condition supports them to create ideas and imagination in order to construct some cultural strategies.

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