

**Common Sense Outlook on Local Wisdom and Identity:  
A Contemporary Javanese Native's Experience\***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores local wisdom and identity as experienced by the writer as a Javanese through his common sense. The writer is interested on this topic since he is seeing the fact of the 'lost generation' in the society he is living in: Yogyakarta. This fact is seen in many aspects of life: be it media, language, food, medicine, and many other cultural artifacts. Therefore, the writer finds it significant to identify and redefine our identity by employing our local wisdom to cope with the challenging global influence and to give contribution to the world.

***Key words: local wisdom, Javanese culture, identity, global cultures***

## Common Sense Outlook on Local Wisdom, Culture and Identity: A Contemporary Javanese Native's Experience

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### A. Introduction: some rationales

This is not an academic writing but more eclectic since this is just a kind of personal experience as a Javanese native living in Yogyakarta. That is why this paper is narrated in the first person point of view. This is what I call as, using Thomas Paine's term when denying the power of the mainstream religion in America, 'common sense'. This paper is also triggered by the idea of a professor of UNS a while ago in the Seminar on *Sastra dan Perubahan Sosial*, saying that there is no use of preserving culture, which is quite shocking personally to me, though not any more after a while thought.

I am also concerned with the 'seemingly-nothing-left-local-culture' in Yogyakarta. This is a place with so many titles, special province, student city, cultural city, and many other labels. For instance, as a student city, there is no representative library compared to the flowering growth of malls, mini markets, cell phone counters, café, motorcycle dealers, etc.

In Bantul, and may be in some other regions in Java, some institutions have the rule to wear batik and to speak in Javanese in particular days. This is one form of maintaining culture or local culture to be specific, which is not significant at all for some people particularly to the professor previously mentioned. But, this is the way to preserve our identity as a Javanese, otherwise we will lose our identity and our grandchildren might not know what batik is. This is just an example. There are many other examples like the use of Javanese language compared to Indonesian and English, Javanese herbal medicine like *jamu*, compared to chemical medicine, and many others.

So many rationales has been the background of this paper, and based on that, this paper, would try to explore how local wisdom must be employed to keep our identity as a Javanese. Or, are those what we have done are already enough and on the right track? Why should there be line saying "Save Our Java" in the back of a student's jacket? How should we through our local cultures compete with the dominant global cultures and values?

### B. What is local wisdom?

Talking about local wisdom, we usually refer to indigenous people. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines indigenous as naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place. So it belongs to particular indigenous people and their knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is local knowledge unique to a given culture or society. It is the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and an intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture. Indigenous knowledge evolved from years of experience and trial-and-error problem solving by people working in their environments. Source of knowledge management relating to their production derive from their local knowledge and traditions originated by their ancestors. This indigenous knowledge has been modified through accumulated practical experiences and passed on from one generation to the next.

Types of indigenous knowledge are cultural artifacts of the local people such as, food, housing, medicine, cloth, mode of production, literature, songs, music, and many others. In Yogyakarta, we have Javanese language, batik, farm, *joglo*, and many others. So, local wisdom is the knowledge that is discovered by local people through the accumulation of experiences in trials and integrated with the understanding of surrounding nature and culture. When a friend of mine said that Yogyakarta is hotter than Surabaya, unconsciously I am anxious that we have left our local wisdom. We have left farming for life but it changes into property business. Its land is fertile so it is supposed to be farming as the main mode of production but today we see that property business has swallowed the farm field. Is it the failure of local wisdom that it cannot fulfill our needs? Or may be I see it wrongly. It is now very hard to find *bakul jamu* our society even in the traditional market, but we find drugstore even in every corner of the street. Is it the failure of local wisdom? Or there is no failure of local wisdom; it is just that we do not employ that appropriately.

### **C. How should local wisdom be beneficial?**

The following are some requirements of local wisdom to be beneficial to the people. First, local wisdom must be integrated with the understanding of surrounding nature and culture. In terms of food, *gaplek* and *thiwul* is showing the local wisdom of Gunungkidul people. This is because *telo bonggol*, from which the two kinds of food are made of, grow well in that place.

Second, local wisdom is dynamic. It is flexible to the global situation. Malioboro is the artifact of this. This is a great place in that of its transportation. It is a kind of link bridging between civilizations: traditional and modern one. There we can see *becak* and *andhong* as well as bus and the latest Mercedes Benz. Third, the use of local wisdom must be effective to provide income, reduce cost/expenses, production efficiency, and improve quality of life.

Fourth, it is simple but elaborative and comprehensive. It is usually oral in nature. It is adapted to local, cultural, and environmental conditions. It is dynamic and flexible. It is tuned to needs of local people. It corresponds with quality and quantity of available resources. It copes well with changes.

Local wisdom can be in the several types: food (specific to the place, suitable with the climate and raw materials at that place), medicine (for prevent and cure), techniques of production (to solve the problem and decrease labor), housing (suitable with climate and raw materials), and cloth (suitable with climate and raw materials).

### **D. Have We Employed Our Local Wisdom?**

Most parents will not be concerned on their children's Javanese language proficiency. It will differ with English language. They will do anything to make their children speak English. Why so? May be the most basic reason is that of pragmatism. They can live with English. In postcolonial perspective this is explainable.

In Africa, those who speak English and convert to Christian are higher than those who are not. It means they prefer leaving their original and indigenous culture. This is best explained in *The Slave Girl*, a novel by Buchi Emecheta.

Another case is seen in the clothing. The students of Yogyakarta must wear batik in Friday. What happens if this is not the rule, I bet they will prefer wearing jeans, though we know that culturally jeans do not belong to our culture, with its tropical climate.

Still another fact that we are leaving our local culture is best depicted in the food we eat. The developing temptation to eat fast-food as described in the media has already swallowed us to the image that eating in KFC or Mc Donald gives pride. In fact, there are no raw materials of it deriving from our local culture. Compare those fact with the *gudeg*, *growol*, *thiwul*, *gethuk*, etc., which are almost left by our young generation.

From the fact previously mentioned, it is obvious that our local wisdom has not been adequately utilized. Therefore we have to think what is wrong with this. The followings are some alternatives to learn from other culture in term of how they redefine their local culture to survive in the global world.

### **E. Valuable Lesson from English: writing tradition**

Some valuable lessons to learn from English culture is its language. As we know, English is the mostly used international language among the international languages officially used in the United Nations. Even, I might extremely say that we cannot escape from English. How is it possible? *It is a local wisdom going global.*

As we know, before it is widely used around the world, the most important language is Latin, especially related to the scientific subject. English has replaced it. This is interesting. How is it possible?

Once in the Norman Conquest era, English was isolated and oppressed by the French. French was dominating in the place later called England. Anglo Saxon people were invaded by the Normandy.

They have then to obey the ruler's law: that French must be the first language of the people at that time. So, this is not about the language only, this is related to the situation that happens in particular places. In this case it has something to do with war and invasion.

However, in Chaucer era, as recorded in its literature, he adopted the style of writing and values of literatures of the European peoples to be used or included in English literature. The underlying idea of this is that he wants English to be equal with that of European literature and culture. In this case, it has something to do with movement of getting freedom and equality.

Later, English people and their language were spreading all over the world, starting in the New Land later called as the United States of America. This 'invasion' then is followed by the other places all round the world: Africa, Australia, and Asia. In this case it has, once again, something to do with invasion and colonialism.

In Africa, those who are Christian think that they are higher than those with the African natural religion. Here, religion becomes the tool of the colonial people to invade other people. The same thing happened in the US, the Indian people were thought, for instance by Columbus, that the European people were people from heaven, and the Indians were savages.

The development of the English people as recorded in the English literature has been the great proof of how local wisdom has gone global. Anglo Saxon people have used their 'writing tradition' to conquer the world. However, one thing to bear in mind, English has become the language of all people over the world. Then English literature has accommodated all peoples' culture as we can see it in the multicultural literature: be it in Britain, the US, and Australia. All are accommodating the people of non-white peoples. The point is 'it does not degrade English literature but in fact it is enriching'.

#### **F. Valuable Lesson from American Indian's: (Super) Sherman Alexie**

Sherman Alexie is one of the greatest writers in the world. What makes him great are his distinctive style of writing, originality, cultural approach, spirit, courage, self-esteem, and open minded. But, what we might forget is that he is an Indian, an American Indian. As we know, American Indian people or Native Americans are familiar with oral culture and has been marginalized since the arrival of Columbus in the New Land until today. They are today still struggling with poverty, health problem and drugs, and of course literacy. Alexie is trying to break and solve these problems by writing and spreading American Indian culture by being a greatest writer in the world. Remember, he was diagnosed as having hydrocephalus. This is amazing.

What is more amazing is his background of becoming a great writer with no supporting condition from his environment.

I learned to read with a Superman comic book. Simple enough, I suppose. I cannot recall which particular Superman comic book I read, nor can I remember which villain he fought in that issue. I cannot remember the plot, nor the means by which I obtained the comic book. What I can remember is this: I was 3 years old, a Spokane Indian boy living with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state. We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle-class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear and government surplus food. (Alexie, 1998)

Compare the previous condition to ours. Ours is much better, right? So, what is wrong with us? We are supposed to be greater than Sherman Alexie's people, right? Here, I don't want to say which one is better, but I just want to describe that we should not be narrow minded. We should learn from others' cultures or they way others employ their local wisdom to survive and to keep their own identity in this global era.

My father, who is one of the few Indians who went to Catholic school on purpose, was an avid reader of westerns, spy thrillers, murder mysteries, gangster epics, basketball player biographies and anything else he could find. He bought his books by the pound at Dutch's Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army and Value Village. When he had extra money, he bought new novels

at supermarkets, convenience stores and hospital gift shops. Our house was filled with books. They were stacked in crazy piles in the bathroom, bedrooms and living room. In a fit of unemployment-inspired creative energy, my father built a set of bookshelves and soon filled them with a random assortment of books about the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, the Vietnam War and the entire 23-book series of the Apache westerns. My father loved books, and since I loved my father with an aching devotion, I decided to love books as well. (Alexie, 1998)

The previous paragraph is telling that people can do based on whatever surrounding our (this is one definition of local wisdom). They don't have enough money to buy new books, so they buy second-hand books. Here, the most interesting point is that they don't keep their culture shut from another culture. They are naturally familiar with oral culture but they want to open doors for others' culture like writing culture. They know that this is the way Columbus destroyed their culture but they still use it to survive.

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our south and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased sister, my younger twin sisters and our adopted little brother. (Alexie, 1998)

They try to see their position in global world: Indian people among the global culture, with the help of books, even comic book is valuable. And the most important thing is that they start it since their childhood.

A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike. I fought with my classmates on a daily basis. They wanted me to stay quiet when the non-Indian teacher asked for answers, for volunteers, for help. We were Indian children who were expected to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations inside the classroom but subverted them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was 10 years older. As Indian children, we were expected to fail in the non-Indian world. Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitied by non-Indians.

Yes, this is a must to know our Javanese culture but it is less important to study others especially for children. It will be great that a Javanese child can talk about Hamlet, Dickens, Amy Tan, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, and many other great writers.

I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky. I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open. I read books at recess, then during lunch, and in the few minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments. I read books in the car when my family traveled to powwows or basketball games. In shopping malls, I ran to the bookstores and read bits and pieces of as many books as I could. I read the books my father brought home from the pawnshops and secondhand. I read the books I borrowed from the library. I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the

clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. **I was trying to save my life.**

Despite all the books I read, I am still surprised I became a writer. I was going to be a pediatrician. These days, I write novels, short stories, and poems. I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation. There must have been visiting teachers. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they exist? I visit the schools as often as possible. The Indian kids crowd the classroom. Many are writing their own poems, short stories and novels. They have read my books. They have read many other books. They look at me with bright eyes and arrogant wonder. They are trying to save their lives. Then there are the sullen and already defeated Indian kids who sit in the back rows and ignore me with theatrical precision. The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. **"Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives.** (Alexie, 1998)

The ones printed bold above are significant in that spirit of saving identity is coming from individual and then it moves to community. Books are they key for survival and keeping identity. By books, of course this is not an Indian indigenous culture; they can survive and live with dignity among many other cultures in the world. However, through book, their local cultural values are read by others for example in preserving the environment. People will not argue the Indian's ethic on environment (compare it to the European destructive actions).

### **G. Some Concluding Remarks to Employ Our Javanese Local Wisdom**

From those descriptions on English and Native American experience, I can see that local wisdom is deriving from our indigenous cultures but we should realize that it impossible not to be in contact with other' cultures. As a Javanese, I think, it is better for us not to insist on maintaining and preserving our culture by slogan and jargon like "Save Our Java." It is better for us to 'do some actions' to do that by, for example, writing.

Of course, we should not isolate ourselves from others, for example by writing our culture using Javanese Language. What happens to *Djaka Lodhang*. Do our children read it? I believe not. Javanese writing will be read by limited people. So, we have to employ our local wisdom in a creative way. For example, it will be great Javanese writer writes in English and employ some Javanese terms or philosophies or exploring Javanese cultural values so that they will be read by the more general reader. By doing this, I believe positively in the future of Javanese culture and it will give great contribution all over the world.

This is just a 'common sense' response to my own culture. Of course we should employ our local wisdom contextually based on our own resources and capacities. But, we have already enough knowledge and *adiluhung* cultural values to give valuable contributions to the world, right? What are we waiting for? This is the way Alexie saves his and his people's lives. Otherwise, Javanese culture will be 'lost' in these global cultures.