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# **MERAPI SPIRITUAL TOURISM: TRACING THE JAVANESSE VALUES OF LOCAL WISDOM**

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## **Abstract**

Mount Merapi area is greatly potential for Javanese spiritual tourism. It saves million of mysteries filled with mystical and spiritual senses. However, we must remember that effort to realize the idea will confront obstacles since, at the same time, facilities for natural tourism, sport, entertainment, and economic business have also been built in this area and, thus, impeding and counterproductive to the Javanese spiritual values. The development of Merapi spiritual tourism is expected to extend the local wisdom of, among other, religiousness, social tolerant, nature and environment appreciation in spiritual sense.

## **Introduction**

Constructive aspiration of the government and the people of Yogyakarta to jointly raise the spiritual tourism in this region deserve close attention, for there remain many tourism problems to solve. In terms of Natural Resources and Human Resources potential in Yogyakarta tourism, both aspects need only small face lift improvement in order to be ready to greet the era of global tourism.

Closely examined, the province of DIY can be separated into five functional areas, namely: (1) tourism area, such as Parangtritis beach and the area along the south coast, Sultanate palace, Prambanan temple, Kaliurang, Malioboro, Mount Merapi area, (2) educational area, especially Sleman and Bantul regencies, (3) industrial area that includes Kasongan, Pundong, Kotagede, Moyudan, Minggir, Godean, and Sentolo, (4) trading area, especially the center of the city, and (5) agricultural area that is divided into regions of rice fields in Sleman and Bantul, the area of crops, mostly in Kulonprogo and Gunung Kidul regencies (Humas DIY, 2005:2).

The intent and purpose of enhancing the image of Yogyakarta tourism to international standard must appropriately be matched with the inventory, restructuring and empowering of its potential for tourism. As the main tourist destination in Indonesia, Yogyakarta is ready to welcome both domestic and foreign tourists. A number of elements of tourism from the cultural tourism, historical tourism, nature tourism, spiritual tourism, museum tour, and other aspects of tourism can be found in Yogyakarta.

At the outset, Yogyakarta is known for its cultural tourism for this region is still

honoring the life of the Sultanate palace which is believed by many circles as one of the center of Javanese culture (besides Surakarta). In this Javanese cultural center the potential of tourism is found to be very diverse. For example, Taman Sari, Sekaten Ceremony, Sultanate warrior demonstration, Ambarukmo inns, Kota Gede, etc.

In relation to the historical aspects, historical attractions and heritages in Yogyakarta seems to be a matter of pride, because they can become the subjects of research and observation of the course of history of a nation. Tourists can study them both for academic and curiosity purposes. The examples include the tombs of the kings in Imogiri, Fort Vredenburg, cave Slarong, Monument Yogya Kembali, and other tourism assets. Professionally managed historical assets are important for education and research activities. And experts from foreign countries are very enthusiastic on them.

Ancient relics of temples, monuments and other artifacts prove the existence of a high civilization in Yogyakarta area in the past (Dinas Pariwisata DIY, 2009). People can imagine how great this nation was in the past when they visit the beautiful Prambanan temple, Queen Boko's palace complex, Risan Semin temple, and the remaining temple sites in various ancient relics. This tourism package frequently provide show and entertainment organized in Yogyakarta, such as Leather Puppet, ketoprak, slapstick, traditional fashion show, traditional handicrafts and other traditional arts.

One of the great potential of tourism in Yogyakarta is spiritual tourism. This kind of tourism brings about advancement in local wisdom of Javanese characteristic that in turn greatly useful for the development of Javanese qualities itself. Spiritual tourism holds great potential to organize and develop is that of spiritual tourism in the region of Mount Merapi having a mystical and mysterious sense.

### ***Tourism Development***

Tourism development in Yogyakarta is basically in accord with the economic development determined also as TTI (*trade, tourism, and investment*) program. Therefore, in accord with the concept of JNEA (*Jogja Never Ending Asia*), this tourism promotion is intended also to invite various circles of businessmen, investors, tourists, and researchers from around to come to this city. In turn, Yogyakarta, is expected to accomplish the predicate as a leading economic region in Asia in trade, tourism and investment. As in the case of Malaysia and Singapore, Jogja will join the *club of Asia*, to compete and race in a positive way to realize their respective programs. For all of that, maximum effort for internal arrangement is a necessary.

By internal arrangement we mean to program the various tourism projects that

contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the tourism development. Tourism object improvement is a necessary. It can be started from the middle of the town, for example, from several rivers such as the Gajah Wong (GW) and Kali Code (KC), which stores natural wealth potential. When done with aesthetics touch on the basis of conservation of natural resources, the rivers of in the center of the city can become a fascinating tourism object. This program is also expected to awaken the community to maintain their river in a healthy and clean condition. When such awareness came up, the idea to establish some "river cop" or "garbage cop" is no longer necessary.

Tourism rest on a basis called "4 K" namely, *kebersihan* (cleanliness), *keindahan* (beauty), *kenyamanan* (comfort), and *keamanan* (security). All the four must be aligned, and one should not be any less. Thus, it is common that tourism object arrangement refers to the four basics. And that will not be possible without any support and awareness of the community. To take trivial example, tags stating "Do not scribble sights", obeying the rules of taking out the trash, and preventing pickpockets from operating in major tourist destinations, and differentiating tourist resorts from those intended for prostitution.

Other similarly important internal arrangement is to prepare yourself emotionally, socially, and culturally in dealing with an influx of tourists, especially from foreign countries. My paper on the preparation of Yogyakarta to become a Foreign Cultural Centers (*Bernas, 04/22/2002*), has tried to explain the various aspects that must be anticipated in welcoming the inevitable acculturation, one of them is to be prepare culturally. Reflecting from Bali's tourism that seems to have gone international earlier, Yogyakarta community need also to be prepared socially and culturally to confront either foreign culture or other ethnic that would overwhelm their territories.

We need to thumbs-up to the various circles of society who have been trying to internationalize the layers of society. Foreign language courses that have so far been held by Colleges (e.g. UNY) for groups of street vendors, taxi drivers, tour guides, and rickshaw pullers, should be a sustainable program (not as the community service program that last for one or two months only). For that reasons, local government and private sectors should be a partner and main sponsor of programs of HR improvement in this tourism sector (Tim PPM FBS UNY, 2008). It's not funny when the many tourists who visit Yogyakarta turn out to be confused because not many people in this city are capable to communicate in foreign languages.

Unfortunately, tourism information systems in this city remain inadequate. Even an observer of tourism, Dr. Laretna TA, states that the Yogyakarta tourism information systems can be classified as very poor. Not much information available, either in written form or

signboard, much less neatly organized. Information received is mostly through word of mouth, or rely simply on oral tradition (KR, 26/4102). Local government should also think seriously and maximally how to prepare and develop natural and internal human resources of tourism sector to anticipate the realization of highly complex multicultural tourism.

### ***Development of Merapi Area***

Mount Merapi area, so far remain the world with a million mysteries, comprises one of spiritual tourism resort for Yogyakarta and the surrounding communities (Suyatna, 2007). Faiths and cultures associated with the mystical world thrive here, as if not affected by the change in the direction of secularization in the era of massive globalization that erodes any human mystical beliefs. Even now Merapi remains the mystical center for Javanese. Then, will the existence of the National Parks of Mount Merapi (Merapi area) be potentially changing the map of the spirituality of the community?

Examined closely, it seems that Merapi area development plan prepared in a less mature and focused manner. The echo sounds to emerge and disappear. Recently, on 2/20/2002, the university (represented by the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga) held a seminar entitled "Initiating Ideal Format Strategy and Development Plan of Mount Merapi National Park Area." Some of the parties directly involved (e.g. local government of Sleman, the Tourism Office) was asked to discuss about water management, flood prevention, erosion, soil fertility, and the prospects for tourism. However, the working papers at the seminar table echoed nothing. In fact, people seem to be confused, because what the government and relevant parties will be doing about the plan remains confusing or unclear.

There is a dispute over the name or the term "National Park". It was Forestry Department which argues that the name is not appropriate because the land provided for the park will be only 1000 ha, and it was deemed not qualified, or less extensive. The term "national" should be downgraded to a "regional". Thus, the name might read as "Merapi Mountain Regional Park Area". The question of "regional" or "national", in my opinion, is totally insignificant compared to what the earlier objectives of development of the region. Regions surrounding both mountains were basically conservation areas that must be completely protected, developed, and utilized.

For that reasons, the management of these areas should never be deviated from original intent. Cases of skyrocketing land prices, in areas which began to be processed and developed, must be controlled so as not to lead to the commercialization of the area. Take YECC (*Yogyakarta Exhibition Convention Center*) in Bantul area for example. It has caused land prices to soar in the region: the prices that initially ranged from 150-200 thousand/m, increased to 250-300 thousand/m, and that mean 50-100% increase. Not mentioning the

number of immigrants who eventually is expected to cause problems. The last issue seems, however, to have started to be anticipated with the "initial ban" for those who intend to settle in the region of Merapi.

Development of natural areas, such as Merapi region, should at least bring about benefits to the surrounding community. Now people realize that the golf course in the vicinity Cangkringan turn out to be less beneficial to the surrounding community. In essence, the management of natural resources, including the development of the Merapi area, is a bet men places to the duties and responsibilities entrusted by God to him as the Saint, in religious sense.

### ***Merapi Spiritual Tourism and Local Wisdom***

One of the biggest potential in the region of Merapi is the belief in "The Merapi", regarded as the guardians of cultural and spiritual life of Yogyakarta and Surakarta palaces. The belief seems to have been deeply rooted in society. In fact, in Cangkringan village, "Labuhan Merapi" ceremony held annually; a ceremony aimed to resist disasters and to beg for salvation (Suyatna, 2007).

The fact that Yogyakarta is the second largest tourist destination after Bali is undeniable. Yogyakarta distinctiveness as a center of culture, natural panorama and spiritual tourism retains its attractiveness to these days. Those who believe in mysticism will not forget to visit the tomb of Imogiri, Sultanate Palace, Parang Kusuma beache, and the slopes of Merapi. The latter must be managed and prepared seriously in one "spiritual tourism package" along with the development of Merapi area.

Utilization of natural areas to serve as a spiritual tourist destination can bring many benefits: (1) attract tourists on a regular basis, (2) morally protected, that is, the visiting tourists places themselves as men who guarded the sanctity of the shrine. These comprise the core of local values and wisdom in spiritual tourism. The same things will be more intense when become truly solid Javanese spiritual resort. The pilgrims would put themselves as persons filled with the values of wisdom: religious, social tolerance, and friendship with nature.

Indeed, Amin (2001) illustrate that Islam and Javanese spiritualism can co-exist harmoniously. Its positive impact, therefore, is that the nature and buildings in the region tend to be well-maintained. This cannot be separated from the intention of the visitors to do a pilgrimage, instead of making natural or environmental damage.

The case does not apply to tourists visiting the area of non-spiritual natural

resorts. In the latter tourist destination, they tend to perform vandalistic acts, such as littering the place, scribbling artifacts, and even committing sinful acts. It is an open secret that on Parangtritis beach, Kaliurang motels, and in several other tourist area immoral acts are common phenomena. The consequence of the development of Merapi area as one of spiritual tourist destination is, at least, the necessity for preparedness in a variety of aspects related to Javanese cultural (spiritual) events, such as *Labuhan Merapi* and *Suran*. Alternatively, by creating spiritual events relevant to the cultural sense of Kraton or Javanese belief in general. Spiritual tourism package to Merapi must be supported by professional management, such as providing specially trained tourist guide (who understand the culture of Javanese spiritualism) for spiritual tour, setting up permanent tourist transportation routes, and constructing the necessary buildings for relevant purposes.

### **Constraints to Spiritual Tourism Development**

Actually, the development of spiritual tourism of Merapi area is already underway. In fact, people in this region feel sure of it. However, this condition became a bit messy when at the same time local governments, with support from central government, was also developing this area as a National Park of Mount Merapi. Thereby the community began to feel suspicious and worried. Spiritual tourism and economic development simultaneously raises the risk of counter-productive situation to the development of spiritual tours Merapi.

The problem is that the central government has given green light, which mean ready to assist and provide local flexibility to develop their respective regions. Unfortunately, the socialization program, initiated by the Government of Sleman and certain related parties, begin to face constraints. The problem become increasingly complex when the local people whose land is included in the program of the National Park Merapi directly stating their disagreement. This was revealed in a meeting of residents who formed what so called PASAG (*Paguyuban Sabuk Gunung Merapi*) in the hamlet Trono, Krinjing village, Magelang (KR, 23/4/02). Some villages joined in the group were in the region of Klaten, Boyolali, Magelang and Sleman.

PASAG was organized by local people to anticipate the various possibilities related to the realization of National Park of Merapi. Learning from the case of Kedung Ombo Dam project that continue to cause problem until now and Cangkringan luxurious and exclusive golf course, now the residents around Merapi seems more alert of the possible social and cultural trauma as experienced by the citizens directly affected by this kind of development.

Whether intentionally or not, the emergence of problems of development that exploits a region – let alone mountains and forests – stem from the lack of socialization to the citizens. A resident of Srumbung, Magelang even expressed his sadness about the realization of the Merapi National Park, "Our space will be limited. After all, it is outsiders who take the profit". For members of PASAG, Mount Merapi is the place they live in socially and spiritually. That means they can not be separated from the area, for any reason. The cases of marginalization of citizens in favor of the development of an area have really haunted their lives to these days. They worry that their social and spiritual life will simply disappear. It time for the competent parties to socialize the development program for Merapi National Park to the citizens as soon as possible. This includes a commitment that, first, they will not be evicted from their homes and their own lives. The promise of protection from Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X to the people around Merapi, that they still have the whole Merapi, seem very reassuring for them (*Bernas, 6/5/08*). The governor's words seem worth-reference for the policy in later stages. Second, the existence of the Merapi National Park is to empower local communities in the broadest sense. Third, the manager of Merapi National Park will not occasionally scrape the hereditary cultural and spiritual sides of the community.

First things conceived in the mind of local people are marginalization and eviction. Thus far, people would always noted that whenever the government implementing physical development, cases of forced evictions, unreasonable land sales compensation, and other social cases began to emerge. Therefore, one important point in the realization of this park is to organize the social life of local people without having to disturb their lives. Prohibition of entry for immigrants in the vicinity of Merapi, as one of the points of agreement between the government and local people, must be absolutely obeyed, otherwise social order of civic life will disrupted. This could be due to the possibility of immediate land prices soaring. People will be swayed in the game of land price initiated by land brokers and opportunists.

Attempts to empower the people around Merapi must be done in familial yet professional management. That is, citizens should always be involved in its management, either by employing or assisting them. In my opinion, this is a very reasonable way and will, in turn, gain sympathy and support of residents. Residents in general are used to interact and wrestle with Merapi. They took something from Merapi, but also giving something to Merapi. One of the residents assert, "we actually prefer the conservation of forests, because we are used to find grass to the woods on the mountain while at the same time carrying mahogany seedlings to be planted up there". The habit of local people to maintain Merapi, both physically and spiritually, assert that they are the actual custodians of Merapi. It is known from their ability to interact with their environment naturally.

Third, the realization of the National Park of Merapi should really pay attention to the corporate life, customs, and cultural hereditary patterns found among the people around Merapi. They are not only paying attention, but also respect Merapi. For residents of PASAG and those in its vicinity, Merapi was "Mystical Creatures" that store almost all their lives. While the volcanologists believe the eruptions of Mount Merapi as the most powerful in the world, local people conceive them as "blessings" that was intended for them. Beliefs and way of thinking like this, I think, do not need to be deconstructed. Let it be as it used to be. Instead, managers or the government needs to embrace the citizens to prepare themselves for making such a package of "Merapi spiritual tourism" in the environment of the National Park. This kind of tourism will be automatically empower and simultaneously respect the communities living around Merapi in the truest sense. If the government or the parties responsible for the development of National Parks can not wait to make it happen, then the third point of social and cultural issues must be given priority handling. Stop immediately the debate over trivial matter on the extent, the name, or other benefits.

### **Closing Remarks**

Once again, construction and tourism development needs to consider the purpose and substance. Spiritual tourism in the region of Merapi can be developed safely, peacefully, and with relatively low volatility, if the process of development involves a number of related elements of the community. A number of elements of society are among others: local governments, tourism agencies, among scholars, community leaders, academics, and communities whose lives are directly related to Merapi. The parties might contribute to the problem solving that are relevant to the development of spiritual tourism. The development of spiritual tourism will not be appropriate when concentrated simply to obtain financial gain. This type of tourism should be directed towards the development of Javanese spiritual qualities and values of local wisdom of spiritual tourism actors of society.

Meanwhile, the orientation of the national park management in this region must be consistent with the maintenance of public confidence in the values of local wisdom and Javanese spirituality, particularly in the area of Yogyakarta. The development of tourism, irrespective of the kind, should be directed primarily at the conservation of water, nature and value of local wisdom, and dedicated for the greatest welfare and spiritual harmony of society.