



JAVANESE VILLAGE WISDOM: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO STORIES BY TURIYO RAGILPUTRA ¹

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of two short stories by the contemporary Javanese poet and short story writer Turiyo Ragilputra. These stories were originally written in Javanese during the 1990s. Like most modern literary works in Javanese, these stories are about the lives of ordinary people in contemporary rural Java. However, the incidents in the stories are not simple. Lives in contemporary rural Java—the most modern part of Indonesia—have become complicated and different from how they used to be. During the 1990s, particularly, Indonesia underwent many significant economic, political, and social changes, and these changes—which actually started to begin in the 1960s (Anderson, 1965)—affected the lives of common people in rural areas. In these stories, Turiyo Ragilputra records these changes in rural Central Java through the incidents and the relationship among the characters. In a way, it is through the incidents and the relationship of the characters of the stories that we can take a closer look at the contemporary rural Javanese lives, culture, and values. In addition, we can also take a closer look at what kinds of problems contemporary Javanese villagers have.

*Key words:*Javanese, wisdom., Turiyo Ragilputra

TURIYO AND HIS WORKS

Turiyo was born in a village of Kaibon, Ambal, Kebumen and has lived there ever since. He is therefore well placed to be a very keen observer of rural environment. Through the two stories, “Gendir,” (Prabowo, 1994:55-59) and “The Death of Sura Topeng,”⁵ (Suratno, 2001: 1-6) we can see the “affairs” of unfortunate village people. These two short stories do not tell us about happy village people but about people who seem to have never enjoyed happiness in their lives. Although they are “only” stories, we still can consider

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the stories to be a reflection on contemporary rural Javanese lives because Turiyo, as a member of his society, can be considered a "key informant" about it (Phillips, 1987). This is to say that his writing is based on everyday lives in the villages where he lives and around him. As literature, the stories may not directly reflect the "social reality" of Javanese life in all its aspects but they do provide us with some important perspectives.

The two stories share one major theme, i.e. "village wisdom," if I may use the term. By "village wisdom" I mean the traditional values still held by village people, despite the process of never ending modernization which is now taking place in Indonesia, and especially in Java. Although people today tend to be more individualistic and communal relationships have been undergoing big changes, village people still have compassion for others. For example, in dealing with the ruthless authorities, they often choose to forgive them rather than take revenge on them. However, in these stories, before each main character is able to reach this point, he or she must face some complicated problems. Because each of them is involved in these complicated matters, the simplicity of the village life in these stories no longer remains.

To discuss the Javanese values which are present in these stories, I think it is important to discuss the following problems: who is involved in each story, what are their social statuses, what do they do as a result of their positions in society, and what is the quality of their relationship with each other? In the Javanese context, these questions embrace major values: the philosophy of *takdir*, the obligations involved in vertical relationships, the nature of morality, the responsibilities of service, and the nature of the various commitments of individuals to each other. From the stories, we can see people have few problems as far as the horizontal relationship is concerned. On the other hand, in vertical relationships (i.e. the common people versus authorities), people seem to have more complicated problems to deal with. In other words, life seems to be simple when people of the same class (group) relate to each other, but it becomes complicated when two different groups of people are in contact with each other.

THE MAJOR CHARACTERS

In "Gendir," the main character, Gendir, is involved in a relationship with his master, the *lurah* or village chief. As a servant, he is faced with the fact that he has to do whatever his master tells him, even when it is against his conscience. It is clear that the nature of their relationship is vertical. In

the second story, "The Death of Sura Topeng," Parjo and the other people also have vertical relationship with Sura Topeng, the *lurah* of the Kemuning Village. As in "Gendir," the common people have no choice but to surrender to the village authority. Thus, when we speak of who is involved in these stories, it is immediately clear that the characters are from two different social groups. In what follows, I will discuss each of these characters, situations and the values associated with them in more detail.

"Gendir"

Gendir is a typical Javanese village person. Although Turiyo does not state explicitly that Gendir is uneducated, we can expect that he will be uneducated, or have only a little education at the most, and that he will also be poor. The major problem in the story relates to *takdir*, destiny. Koentjaraningrat has suggested that: "in general, illiterate village people, who are very poor, accept their lives as a 'destiny.' Basically, they think their lives miserable and they have to accept it as it is." (Koentjaraningrat, 1984)

However, through Gendir's mother, Turiyo also tells us that Gendir is in a dilemma. Gendir is uncertain about accepting his fate, when it involves dishonesty. Gendir's mother is a strong believer in *takdir*, destiny, as we can see it from what she says to Gendir:

"You know, Ndir, human beings are no more than dust in the wind. If the dust falls on gold or diamond, it will shine. But, if it falls on something disgusting, it will also look disgusting."

Gendir understands that his mother wants him to accept his destiny. By becoming the *lurah*'s right hand man, she considers that Gendir is like dust that falls on gold or diamond and she wants him to maintain his position, no matter what. Actually, Gendir could stop being the *lurah*'s right hand man but her mother does not want him to do so. At this point, we are confronted with another interesting assumption of Javanese villagers to life, i.e. it is the dream of the majority of common people to have a better life, to become more middle class, even to become a *priyayi*, as Atmowiloto (1986) writes in *Canting*.³ At least, we can see this aspect in Gendir's mother. She has the

3 "Everyone wants to be *priyayi*. The ones who are already *priyayi* want to become even more *priyayi*. The rich ones want to be richer. The ones with rank want higher rank. All of them are *priyayi*. Rank, wealth, title, that's what being *priyayi* is about. Any one of those alone, that's *priyayi*. Not to mention all three of them at once ..." (Arswendo Atmowiloto, *Canting* (1986), quoted and translated by Suzanne A. Brenner.

dream of living a good life and it is only through Gendir that she can realize this.

“The Death of Sura Topeng”

The second story is quite shocking and contains a bitter irony. The spirits of the dead people in the Kemuning Village want to reject the corpse of Sura Topeng, the head of the Kemuning Village, which is about to be buried, because during his life, Sura Topeng was a tyrant. In “Gendir,” Gendir is used by his master the lurah as a mere tool to get everything he wants; in “The Death of Sura Topeng,” Parjo, Kardi Ceking, and Kemin are the actual victims of Sura Topeng’s ruthlessness. Ironically, they want to take their revenge in the other world. This further tells us that village people have always been the losers in their relations with the people who hold power.

Indeed, Parjo, Kardi Ceking, and Kemin are a representative of Javanese villagers who are actually loyal to their leaders. Despite their poverty, they could accept their fate if Sura Topeng was not ruthless; because, in fact, they were not demanding. They are simple people. In Javanese society, the common people like them may not like their leaders but they will not express their resentment openly. However, in dealing with Sura Topeng, Parjo and the others can no longer take what Sura Topeng has done to them. Have the common people been so angry with their leaders so that Turiyo presents such characters like Parjo, Kardi Ceking, and Kemin? We shall examine this later.

THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TWO STORIES

“Gendir” is just a tool to his master. His position reminds us to some extent of the position of the clown figure Semar in the *wayang* shadow-theater, who serves prince Arjuna so that Arjuna can get whatever he wants. When Arjuna is tempted to do something wrong, Semar always warns him about the consequences of his actions. Arjuna, in return, always obeys Semar because in fact Semar is a god who takes the form of a servant. However, real life is not *wayang*. Gendir is not Semar and is only a common person—dust in the wind—who can do nothing but to obey his master. Unfortunately, his master, the village head, is not a good leader:

His master whispered something into his ear. Gendir frowned. He just did not understand his master’s way of thinking.

"I assure you, it is all right to do this sort of thing in these modern times, Ndir," his master said, tapping Gendir's belly because he could not tap Gendir's shoulder.

"Don't you have pity for the people involved?"

"Pity? Are you a nut? In this era, if you always felt sorry for other people, you would never get anything for yourself."

"So you are a cruel man, aren't you?"

"It's not about cruelty or kindness, Ndir. This is a good opportunity and I should make the most out of it. This is an opportunity, Ndir, can't you see that? An o-p-p-o-r-t-u-n-i-t-y," the chief said with great satisfaction.

"But, the common people have rights, *Ndara*," Gendir persisted.

"Yes, but, if no one tells them that, how can they protest? They can't, can they?"

The above quote explains much about the nature of power as it is understood in contemporary Java. The village headman does not use his power to make his people prosperous. Instead, he uses it for his own prosperity. Mulder notes that there has been a change in thinking about the function of the lurah in rural Java. In the old days, the lurah was expected to serve as the guardian of the people; he was meant to be on the people's side. Now, by contrast, lurah are the right hand men of the central government. Thus, they represent the power of the state; they no longer take the people's side. On certain occasions, they are harsh to the people; they "issue arbitrary orders, even conduct political censuses, and expect the population to follow his suits, to conform".(Niels, 1996:55)⁴

It should be born in mind that "Gendir" was written in 1994, when New Order still had a very strong hold over power in Indonesia. Politically, during the first half of the 1990s, the common people, *wong cilik*, were very afraid of government officials. It could happen that people who did not follow a lurah's proposals might be considered to be members of *PKI*, the Indonesian Communist Party. Nothing was more dangerous during New Order than being considered a member of *PKI*. Therefore, Gendir—a representative of the village people—chooses to do whatever his master tells him to. In such a political context, it seems that Turiyo did not have any choice but to create such a character. Like most Javanese or even Indonesian writers, he did not have the courage to criticize authorities strongly and openly at that time.

4 Political censuses here mean that lurah, receiving the instruction from the Central Government, gave a special mark to the identity card of the people who had just been released from Buru Island and of other people who were considered to be members of the *PKI*, the former Indonesian Communist Party.

The theme of the corruption of civil leadership can also be found in “The Death of Sura Topeng,” although this story is also different in some ways from “Gendir.”⁵ The story tells that when Sura Topeng was the village leader, he had unlimited power. Whatever he wanted became reality. He punished anyone who went against his will. The people hated him but they could not do anything. What made people hate Sura Topeng even more was the attitude and behavior of his offspring. The villagers therefore decided to seek revenge in the other world.

With a plot like this, Turiyo fully realizes that village people are very helpless when they deal with those who hold power. And because it is their lurah, the village head, that they deal with most directly in their daily lives, their frustration, helplessness, and hatred are aimed directly at him. In a broader context, however, the lurah can be understood as the representative of the state. By comparing “Gendir” and “The Death of Sura Topeng,” we can see that the quality of the relationship between the people and Sura Topeng, the lurah, is even worse compared to that of in “Gendir.” Or, at least, it looks much worse because in this short story Turiyo describes so explicitly the “crimes” of Sura Topeng and his offspring. The winds of reform and the euphoria felt after the fall of Suharto must have given him more courage to express his feelings and ideas.⁶

THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY JAVANESE VILLAGE LEADERSHIP

So far, we have studied the major characters and the nature of their relationships in these two stories by Turiyo Ragilputra. We have seen that in vertical relationships those who are in a subordinate position are destined to submit to the injustices which are often committed by those in superior positions of power. In what follows we shall consider how this value of forgiveness operates in vertical relationships. Magnis-Suseno has argued that Javanese society is at its most ideal when:

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- 5 “The Death of Sura Topeng” was first published in 2001. According to Turiyo, this story was awarded the first prize—out of one hundred and forty one stories—in the short story writing competition held by Sanggar Sastra Jawa Yogyakarta (SSJY) and Lembaga Kajian Budaya Surakarta (LKBS). Together with the other twenty-four stories (the best twenty five short stories), it was published in an anthology (see footnote 4 above).
 - 6 This theme is also present in Turiyo’s poems. See Yosep Bambang MS, “A World Out of Balance: Javanese Society in Turiyo Ragilputra’s Poems” Paper presented to the Center for International Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, Ohio University, 2003.

Peace prevails, good harvests have been put away, everyone has enough to eat and clothes to wear and there is a general climate of satisfaction, a condition of the Javanese call *adil makmur* (just and proper). Such a society is said to realize the Javanese ideals of *lata tentrem harta raharja* (order, peace, prosperity and happiness). Magnis-Suseno, 1997:103).

We do not expect the ideal conditions will often come true, but at least, the society tries hard to achieve it. Through their “vertical orientation,” village people rely on the influential people, on those having high position. (Koentjaraningrat, 1984:441) This means that “a leader must have the qualities of a guardian, or protector (*pengasuh*) who stimulates, leads and guides the ones he has to bring up (*asuhannya*),” (Mulder, 1996:70) People used to believe that traditional leaders of Java had such qualities. At the village level as well, Keeler studies of three lurah in Central Java in 1970, (Keeler, 1985) provided insight into what kind of lurah villagers really wanted. They wanted their leaders to be munificent and to be their patrons. In Keeler’s words, “villagers want very much to see in their headmen powerful leaders ... in this case means first of all spiritually potent, ... and endowed with the qualities—generosity, even-handedness, and a paternalistic regard for people’s welfare—that such potency implies,” (Keeler, 1984:114).

Clearly, in Turiyo’s short stories, Javanese society is far from ideal, largely because cooperation between the people in power and the common people just does not happen. There has been a breakdown in traditional expectations. For Javanese, it is those in power who must take the initiative to create such a society because the village, common people depend on them to do so. In modern Java in general, however, it is widely believed that village leaders who have such qualities are rare. In fact, this is not a new phenomenon and can be seen as early as the 1970s when Keeler (1985:114) did his research in Java. According to Keeler, this crisis was largely the result of nationalism and development programs launched by the central government in Jakarta. The village headmen at that time had no choice but to do what the central government wanted. Furthermore, although many of them may have wanted to be an ideal leader—even if they had such capabilities, they could hardly do it because of the circumstances in which they found themselves. Therefore, village leaders eventually became no more than state agents, and no longer cared whether the people liked them or not.

As the result of “development,” Javanese villages underwent big changes because “the Javanese countryside is now being rapidly penetrated

by a money economy, and by the state administration, by an Indonesian school system, by the mass media, and by the new fashions and commodities," (Mulder, 1996:44) This penetration affected the lives of village people. "Modernity" became the new jargon which seemed to be so important that the people feel obliged to follow it. In order to become modern, they began to leave traditional values behind. Values such as *gotong royong*, mutual cooperation, and social commitment started to become eroded. In addition, people tended to be more individualistic. Horizontal relationships began to change. So did vertical relationships, between the people and their village headmen.

By becoming state agents, the village headmen felt less commitment to "the ones whom they have to bring up," their people. The hard lives of village people became even harder during the authoritarian regime of New Order. The government, including the village level, became repressive and demanding. People complained and felt restless but were not able to do anything about their situation. It was impossible for village people to resist the authorities openly because the state was too strong. Besides, they do not want to risk their lives, as Scott observes in Sedaka, Malaysia, "In the Third World it is rare for peasants to risk an outright confrontation with the authorities over taxes, cropping patterns, development policies, or onerous new laws; instead they are likely to nibble away at such policies by noncompliance, foot dragging, deception," (Scott, 1985:XVI) Similarly, in villages in Java people could only complain about their lives, about their leaders, and about their difficult lives. The authorities knew that the people were complaining, but they pretended not to know. Instead of their listening to the people, the people had to listen to them. Instead of doing their jobs to make people happy and prosperous, the village headmen often took advantage of their position to enrich themselves. In a broader context, the village headmen in Turiyo's stories can be interpreted as government officials in any position.

Reading "Gendir" and "The Death of Sura Topeng," shows us Turiyo's perception of some of the specific ways in which contemporary village leadership was in crisis. Gendir's master clearly does not have the qualities of a good leader. He does not think about the prosperity of the people he has to bring up. The dialogue between Gendir and his master quoted above clearly shows us that the lurah does not have compassion for his people. However, in this short story, Turiyo does not describe in detail the greed of Gendir's master. The political background of Indonesia in the beginning of 1990s made

it (almost) impossible for him to criticize the authorities openly and strongly. Even if he had had the courage to do that, the magazine that published his short story would have censored any strong criticism in his writing.⁷ On the other hand, in “The Death of Sura Topeng,” the common people, represented by the spirits of the *Lemah Abang* cemetery, do most definitely speak strongly to the dying lurah, Sura Topeng. They speak about various kinds of immoral deeds committed by Sura Topeng, and consider them as greedy and cruel. More than that, they also criticize the bad attitudes and behavior of Sura Topeng’s children. This story was written in the end of the 1990s and anyone who is familiar with the political background of Indonesia at this time will easily grasp that Indonesian people were much more courageous in criticizing the authorities after the fall of President Suharto.⁸ Kardi Ceking, Parjo, and other people in this story felt so angry about Sura Topeng that they wanted to take their revenge on him when the time came for Sura Topeng to join them in the other world.

Both Gendir’s master and and Sura Topeng fail to satisfy their people. Instead, they exploit them. The exploitation of the people is very clear in “The Death of Sura Topeng” but is very subtle in “Gendir.” In the Javanese context, it is interesting to also note the implications to what people used to believe when authorities begin to exploit people and are cruel. For Javanese people, the cruelty of authorities is a sign that they are ready to lose their power, as Magnis-Suseno notes:

Should the ruler, however, begin to exploit his people, or should the people become unruly and complain and, therefore, force the king to take ever strongest repressive measures to safeguard his authority, then this is, for the people, a sign that power is slipping away from him. Days are numbered. (Magnis-Suseno, 1997:114)

Magnis-Suseno discusses the concept of power in the context of the royal courts in Java. However, it seems that contemporary Javanese people still believe this in a more general way. In the early 1990s, the dissatisfaction of village people toward the central government increased because life became harder and harder, while the government became more and more

7 Although read mostly by village people, magazines in Javanese did self-censorship to avoid being banned by the government during the New Order.

8 It is, in fact, most likely that this story was written after 1999 when the former President Suharto was ill.

repressive. But many village people had begun to form the opinion that President Suharto began to lose his *wahyu*, charisma, especially after the death of his wife.⁹ Before his fall, the country was chaotic. He tried to use each and every means to maintain his power but, because he had lost his *wahyu*, he failed and, in 1998, he fell not only from presidency but also from grace because so many people condemned him.

Both at the national level and at the local level, we can see how these leaders have failed to be the *bapak*, father, of their people. Instead of getting people out of their troubles, they get them into further troubles. Sura Topeng clearly makes his people suffer by forcing them to sell their lands and their crops to his son and by punishing anyone who dares to refuse his will. In the hands of Gendir's master and Sura Topeng, it is impossible that the village lives will ever be in a *tata tentrem karta raharja* condition.

THE WISDOM OF FORGIVENESS IN ALL SITUATIONS

Scott's work in Malaysia, as we have seen, shows that the "weak" have many "weapons" which they can use to blunt the power of those above them. Instead of resisting the authorities, they can also simply become silent because they know that the authorities will not hear their voices. Berman, who conducted research in Java in the 1990s, says, "Voices of the poor and the marginalized in the third-world contexts are hidden in whispers and resonant silences" (Berman, 1998:6) Berman's words are an accurate description about the behavior of Javanese villagers. When they are not satisfied, when they feel oppressed, they will complain among themselves, but only whisper or fall silent in front of the authorities.

But it is also interesting that the two stories carry an important moral lesson, drawn from Javanese village wisdom: namely that village people are willing to forgive those who have done wrong to them, not only in horizontal but also in vertical situations. In "The Death of Sura Topeng," Parjo, Kardi Ceking and the other people also forgive Sura Topeng in the end. They even pray for Sura Topeng's soul. Why would they do that? Most Javanese village people basically lead simple lives. They are not demanding and are willing to share what they have with other people. While Mulder states that there have been changes in horizontal relationship and that this is true, (Mulder, 1996) this value does still exist today. This is so because common villagers

9 Tien Suharto died in March 1995.

fully realize about their places in society, i.e. that they are *wong cilik*, common people, who should accept whatever happens in their lives as *takdir*, destiny.²⁶ (Magnis-Suseno, 1997:134)¹⁰ Although they do not like to have corrupt leaders, they cannot do anything about them, except in small ways or through silence. Surprisingly, when their leader is in trouble, or is sick, they may even forget the crimes which he has committed. Therefore, it is understandable that in the end of “The Death of Sura Topeng” the people are willing to forgive him for his injustices to them.¹¹

Forgiveness, then, is an attitude from horizontal society which seems to villagers to be effective in vertical relationships as well—both as a practical and a moral strategy. Seen from the cultural context, this may also indicate that village people, apart from their being unfortunate, are the ones who have to work the hardest to maintain harmony—although this may sometimes be a “pseudo-harmony.” As Hildred Geertz observes, “In fact, a significant aspect of all Javanese relationship is that the important thing is not the sincerity of the action but the successful concealment of all dissonant aspects of the relationship” (Geertz, 1989:111). This is especially so in “Gendir” which deals with vertical relationships. Gendir conceals all his feelings from his master because he does not want to ruin the harmonious relationship he has with his master. In front of his master, Gendir shows no strong emotions or disappointment. He hides all his feelings. (Magnis-Suseno, 1997: 124)¹² But on the other hand, in horizontal relationships, there is less need for deceit. The spirits of the Lemah Abang cemetery in “The Death of Sura Topeng” are sincere in their self-presentation. Their attitude reflects what people in Java believe in: *becik ketitik ala ketara*, meaning “whoever does good or bad will be obvious in the end,” and *sapa salah seleh*, meaning “whoever is guilty will be defeated in the end.” These two sayings should make the

10 “Every person has his specific place which has been pre-ordained and which he can do nothing to change. This place is clearly determined by his birth, social position, and geographical living space. Life and death, misfortune and illness are fated (*nasib*) and, one cannot alter. Each place of destiny, in this way, has its own specific tasks that must be fulfilled (*darma*) by those individuals occupying these places”

11 To the best of my knowledge, there were no village people who condemned Suharto before and after his fall. I do not mean that Sura Topeng is identical with Suharto, but it is interesting to relate both of them.

12 The Javanese endeavour, therefore, to show no strong emotions. To show spontaneous feelings is viewed improper. Strong emotions such as joy, sorrow, disappointment, anger, objection, hope, or compassion should be hidden, if possible

authorities always remember that they are in power for the people and never forget that. Unfortunately, Gendir's master and Sura Topeng have forgotten these sayings. It is even more unfortunate that there are many such leaders at the various levels of society in Indonesia today—or so the stories of Turiyo Ragilputra suggest.

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