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“Narimo ing Pandum”: How Highlander Women Perceive Poverty as a Destiny in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta

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Cover Page Footnote
This paper is a revised version of draft that was presented at Southeast Asian Frontiers (SEAF) Workshop Series #1: Highland in Yogyakarta, August 18, 2022. The author personally thanked the reviewers for valuable comments and feedbacks

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“Narimo ing Pandum”: How Highlander Women Perceive Poverty as Destiny in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta.¹

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Abstract

The Javanese proverb “narimo ing pandum” exemplifies a belief among poor people to accept their impoverishment as the Divine will of God. This belief, however, has the adverse effect of habituating people to accept poverty. Such perception is conditioned, among others, by the availability of state-provided social aid as well as family or community support, which has helped the poor to stay afloat in moments of crises. In a patriarchal society, poverty poses even more risks and challenges for women, who are often conditioned to be reliant on men to survive. As such, poor women are likely required to find ways to cope with their helplessness. This article seeks to contribute to discussions on the cultural properties of poverty by exploring aspects of gender inequality. Specifically, it discusses how highlander women in Gunungkidul, the region with the highest poverty rate in Yogyakarta, perceive their impoverishment as Divine date, and explores how their perception of poverty affects their survival. The method utilized is a Life History Approach, which captures the multiple facets of our subjects by analyzing their day-to-day activities and interactions.

Keywords: Culture of Poverty, peasant communities, poor women, social assistance

INTRODUCTION

Yogyakarta is among the provinces in Indonesia with the highest rate of poverty. According to the latest figures by the Central Agency on Statistics, the number of poor rural residents in Yogyakarta amounts to around 139,300 people (BPS, 2022). The number of poor people in the province (11.34 percent) is also higher compared to the national rate of 9.54 percent. These

¹ This paper is the revised version of a draft that was presented at the Southeast Asian Frontiers (SEAF) Workshop Series #1: Highland that took place in Yogyakarta, 18 August 2022. The author would like to personally thank reviewers for their valuable comments and feedback.
findings suggest that poverty remains a major issue for regional and local governments (Ikhsan, 2022). In particular, Yogyakarta’s Gunungkidul Regency has a comparatively high poverty rate of 17.69 percent (Kusnardar, 2022). Geographically, the region is mostly defined by highlands with relatively isolated settlements, which poses an obstacle for its rural populace to access public services and resources.

The high rate of poverty in Gunungkidul Regency can also be explained by other factors beyond its topographical condition. This paper highlights how cultural factors have also played a part behind the high poverty rate in Yogyakarta in general, and Gunungkidul in particular. Specifically, this paper explores how a common wisdom amongst poor Javanese villagers known as “narimo ing pandum” (also colloquially referred to as Nrimo ing Pandhum) informs their approach to day-to-day life. In its simplest definition, “narimo ing pandum” can be likened to a philosophy of stoic acceptance: it asserts the virtue of the simple life of villagers who spend their days toiling, while simultaneously encouraging them to accept the results of their labor as “whatever God eventually decides for them”. The principle encapsulates three interconnected values that defines one’s ethnic-social identity as Javanese, namely: to live a life of temperance; belief over the influence larger spiritual forces (or “God”) has over one’s life; and eventually, to put faith in the benevolence of these spiritual forces, or in “God’s plan” (Jati, 2019).

Combined together, these values ultimately encourage rural Javanese people to accept the hardships they encounter throughout their lives. In the context of social sciences, “Narimo ing Pandhum” can likely be referred to as a “culture of poverty”—the distinct disposition and norms adopted by people living in unfortunate conditions (Jati, 2019). While specific attitudes towards poverty can be observed within the family unit given their shared possessions and resources, “narimo ing pandum” is different: it is far more pervasive due to being diffused to the Javanese social identity,
and can be observed within entire communities due to the similar way of life amongst poor Javanese villagers.

Although “narimo ing pandum” finds its relevance in the generally-impoveryed material living conditions of rural Javanese folk, this is not to say that every poor Javanese people experience poverty—or is affected by it—in a homogenous way. As the experience of highlander women in this study will demonstrate, there is an unmistakable gender dimension within poverty. For example, women will become economically and socially more vulnerable when divorce rates are higher—a well-documented phenomenon throughout the COVID-19 pandemic—or when child marriage among students become more prevalent (Tugu Jogja, 2022). Given their socially-ascribed roles as caregivers for their children, women living in poverty face the double burden of being a breadwinner as well as a mother (Leopold, 2018). Eventually, such difficult, compounding circumstances might lead women to tacitly accept their impoverished conditions as predestined or “fated”.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the link between the principles “narimo ing pandum” among residents of Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta, and more specifically, how highlander women living in the area come to accept their impoverished living conditions. This inquiry contributes to two different discussions on the subject of poverty. First, it aims to enrich existing literature on the culture of poverty, which was initiated by Oscar Lewis (1975) with his groundbreaking work on impoverished families in Latin America, by situating “narimo ing pandum” as a distinct culture of poverty in Indonesia. Second, it expands the general discussion of an “Indonesian culture of poverty” by unearthing its specific material and ideological gender aspects, particularly through the lived experiences of highlander women in Gunungkidul. By situating the particularities of gender over the universality of poverty and culture, this paper also provides supplementary points for current development programs targeting poor women that seeks to do so by “gendering” poverty-alleviation efforts.
“NARIMING PANDUM” AS THE CULTURE OF POVERTY IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

In his seminal work, Oscar Lewis (1975) ascribes the “culture of poverty” as a specific mindset which emerged within families that have experienced poverty over multiple generations. For Lewis, family members came to accept their impoverished conditions through a conservative predisposition of “sticking with the old lifestyle” that is passed down from one generation of an impoverished family to the next. As a result, poor rural families are internally conditioned against conducting social mobilization and achieving higher social status, leaving them to be perpetually classified as underclass within the social structure. Impoverished rural people are thus often caught in a vicious cycle of being morally condemned by society as the “unworthy poor” (Bourgois, 2015), while simultaneously internalizing their socioeconomic hardships as a given.

Lewis argues that a culture of poverty is more prominent in agricultural societies. His case study was on the hacienda (peasant communities) in Mexico and Puerto Rico—two countries with a large peasant population who do not own private assets. After rapid industrialization, the price of land in rural Mexico and Puerto Rico experienced a surge which prevented peasants from acquiring their own land and establishing farming businesses. Furthermore, the assetless peasant population also failed to take other job opportunities outside the agriculture sector (Fukuyama, 2001) and were unable to develop other skills for living.

Lewis argues that a culture of poverty amongst villagers was a culmination of three “encircling” factors that lock them into perpetual impoverishment. First, a lifestyle of (forced) subsistence signified by the inability or reluctance to acquire value assets. Second, an overall stagnancy of social status mobilization due to limited resources and skills. Third, an inequality between production costs and profits due to a range of haphazards, such as fluctuating, unreliable crop yields due to harsh climate conditions or blight. Meanwhile, other scholars
highlight how socio-economic and socio-cultural factors contribute to a “psychology of the poor”, exemplified by feelings of inferiority and intellectual impoverishment (Gao & Postiglione, 2015). These mental states, along with their limited resources, inhibit poor people from planning for the future and force them to focus on day-to-day needs.

On a structural level, a culture of poverty contributes to the problem of social inequality by widening socioeconomic gaps between the rich and the poor. This is especially true for poor people in rural areas, who are forced to work as landless peasants due to their inability to acquire assets and lack of skills to change to higher-earning jobs. On top of this, their limited access towards public services such as quality healthcare and education necessitates them to fend off for themselves in the absence of social safety nets and a means of social mobility. Being “locked in place” within the bottom rungs of the social structure, impoverished peasants would thus be inclined to adopt an attitude of resignation—to “make up their mind” and accept poverty as an unalterable condition.

On the other hand, a tacit acceptance of poverty has also been linked to resilience and resourcefulness (Harvey & Reed, 1996). Communities that recognize their impoverished status as a social condition are inclined to establish and organize systems for sharing resources with one another. At times, such practices of mutual aid are imbued with a certain spirituality: in spite of their impoverishment, the Divine nonetheless still blesses them with enough resources to survive on a daily basis. Another form of resourcefulness amongst the poor is in their capacity to utilize natural resources, such as conducting subsistence farming on forest land or foraging for sustenance and firewood.

Based on these descriptions, there are parallels that might warrant “narimo ing pandum” to be considered as a specific culture of poverty. This proverb is anything but a mere figure-of-speech: it resonates deeply with the lived material conditions of rural Javanese people while simultaneously imbuing their lives with a moral and spiritual meaning. For instance, “narimo ing pandum” does not connote impoverishment in a negative light, but rather encourages one to internalize their low
socioeconomic status as an embedded part of a harmonious social cosmology. This outlook does not imply that poverty itself is virtuous. Rather, the virtue lies in acting accordingly to one’s given position within the social hierarchy—be it as a nobleman, landowner, or peasant (although, understandably, this injunction would resonate far more for the poor).

Consequently, Javanese peasants are likely to exercise temperance throughout their lives. They would be inclined to be modest rather than ambitious, as the latter demonstrates an excessiveness that risks running against Divine Will. The emphasis on preserving social harmony in both vertical and horizontal relationships is also manifested in certain behaviors, such as a general predisposition to maintain a solemn, calm demeanor in working and socializing, and a reluctance towards actions or words that generates or signifies conflict.

“narimo ing pandum” functions as an amalgamation of various values adhered to by Javanese folk, such as acceptance, patience, and gratitude (Maharani, 2018). The encapsulation of these different values into a single proverb, however, simultaneously engenders a pervasive normalization to situations in which these values seem most relevant. As a culture of poverty, “narimo ing pandum” thus provides peasants with the moral-cognitive tools to deal with their hardships. Acceptance of one’s social standing provides justification against precarious living conditions and the lack of social mobility; patience emphasizes the necessity for bearing the burden of heavy toil and other day-to-day misfortunes; while gratitude encourages peasants to make do with whatever they have, which is nonetheless determined by their own resourcefulness.

Yet there are glaring differences between the Latin American families observed by Lewis and the Javanese villagers comprising the subjects of this study. While both groups belong to poor agrarian communities, it is important to note that rural Javanese communities had not suffered as greatly the Lewis’ Mexican peasant society. This is due to the failure of Mexican peasants to diversify their produce by relying on a monocrop or two-crop farming system, which had led to extreme impoverishment when their only type of produce was...
damaged. In contrast, Javanese peasants have been accustomed to diversifying their crops to prevent the catastrophic consequences of a failed harvest (Jati, Hadi, and Thung, 2018; Zamroni, Rozaki, and Yulianto, 2015). Furthermore, Javenese folk have established a strong social support system that enables them to share rations in times of extreme hardship, while the Mexican peasants observed by Lewis only take care of their nuclear and extended family, leaving them severely vulnerable in periods of crisis. This was one of the reasons why Lewis located the emergence of a culture of poverty within the family unit. Conversely, “narimo ing pandum” operates on a larger community level in which impoverishment is a collective phenomenon, a “shared poverty”.

Furthermore, “narimo ing pandum” contains unmistakable religious-spiritual connotations in a degree that Lewis’ original account of a culture of poverty did not. Javanese syncretism often speaks of the relationship between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, in which the microcosmic lives of peasants spent on farming and subsistence exemplifies a harmonious relationship between elements of the macrocosm. Individual peasants rely on nature—a subject in its own right within the macrocosm—for resources to forage, while the farmland they toil often has the status of state property. Their dependence on resources that they don’t perceive as their own (nature, above all, belongs to God, while land belongs to the state entity or upperclassmen) asserts the lowly—yet not necessarily shameful—position of poor peasants within the macrocosmos. Acceptance of one’s lower-class status is also imbued with “karmic” connotations, as dedication to performing one’s given role and enduring the misfortunes that come with it is linked with the rewards of heavenly destiny (Putri, 2020; Sastroatmodjo, 2006). Such submission also functions as an admission of faith: it was the Divine, after all, that puts one where one belongs, and to expect more out of life (such as desiring for social mobility) would be akin to betraying Divine will itself (Lisnanti, 2018).

Table 1 below explains the homologous relation between the concept of the Culture of Poverty and “narimo ing pandum”; taken together, they help us understand the sociocultural processes among
peasant folk in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta. To illuminate this homology, I examine how values of *acceptance, patience, and gratitude* are manifested within each concept.

**Table 1: Comparison between Culture of Poverty and “narimo ing pandum”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Principles</strong></th>
<th><strong>Values and Their Indicators</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Narimo ing Pandum” Culture of Poverty</td>
<td><strong>Acceptance</strong>&lt;br&gt;Both principles put great emphasis on accepting fate or destiny as the will of the Divine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Submissive/Spiritual Traits</strong></td>
<td><strong>Patience</strong>&lt;br&gt;Belief in Karma: peasants must continue working hard and believe that the Divine will eventually reward them for their deeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gratitude</strong>&lt;br&gt;Unwanted outcomes and misfortunes are all part of God’s greater plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual Aid</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sharing with others is an expression of gratitude: one will always have enough for themselves.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong support systems enables members of poor communities to take care of one another in times of crisis, generating communal resilience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source: synthesis of relevant literature.

This table suggests that one key theme to connect the Culture of Poverty and “narimo ing pandum” is faith—be it belief of the Divine, of God, or in “fate”, especially when faced with misfortune and socioeconomic crisis. Meanwhile, such faiths are supplemented with a material apparatus of mutual aid to help communities persevere through crises. One factor that ensures the efficacy of these support systems is the communal value of sharing, which might be indicative of how rural communities possess strong social capital amidst encroaching industrialization in their area.

“GENDERING” POVERTY ALLEVIATION

However, both the Culture of Poverty and “narimo ing pandum” are inadequate in capturing the gender-specific dimensions of poverty. Existing literature on Javanese communities describes women as largely dependent on the male breadwinners of their household. Meanwhile, women who assume the role as primary breadwinner are nonetheless expected to do care work for their children and elders (Zakiyah 2010; Zamroni et al. 2015). Both concepts also only take into account “classical” causes of poverty such as intergenerational poverty, agricultural systems, as well as external factors such as environmental hazards and lack of access to resources. These factors, while playing an undisputed role, posit ingrained cultural dispositions as both the byproduct of unresolved structural problems, as well as the means of their perpetuation. In other words, both concepts are in danger of sliding to a fatalistic view of poverty, and that the poor are unlikely to escape their impoverishment.

To overcome such fatalism, it is important to “emerge out of the conceptual void” and reveal the lived stories of poor people—especially poor women, who have been described as “the poorest of the poor” (Chant, 2006; Karnani, 2011; Nisak and Sugiharti, 2020). There are a number of studies on the relationship between poverty and the position of women in society. In spite of their impoverishment, poor women are
constrained by gender roles and responsibilities from seeking better employment (Bennett and Daly, 2014; Yusrina, 2020). Such constraints are more prevalent in female-headed households or single-adult households, and have left poor women with less economic resources than their male counterparts (Husna, 2021).

These gender-specific vulnerabilities necessitates approaches that are specifically tailored to identify the poverty causes of women. In particular, the “Gendering Poverty” perspective asserts the importance of recognizing gender dimensions in poverty alleviation mechanisms, especially those targeted at poor rural women (Batthyány, 2005; Zeka, 2022). Ultimately, this perspective enables us to understand the specific plights of highlander women in Gunungkidul.

METHODOLOGY

This research project adopts a qualitative approach. Specifically, I utilized the semi-ethnography method of Life History Analysis, which was also employed by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1975). As the title suggests, Lewis sat down with families coming from different socio-economic backgrounds within a single Mexican village to understand the structural condition of rural Mexico from different standpoints. The main data source for Life History Analysis is narration of day-to-day experience, including thoughts, indirect statements, social interactions, and feelings on something. The first step is to note the entire daily activities of our respondents, so to say, “from dusk to dawn”. After acquiring a thick amount of information, the researcher divides the data source in a scale of priority—selecting relevant parts of the narration that would comprise new findings of their research. Particular narratives are considered relevant if they provide a point of debate or fill in the gaps within existing theories of the same topic, or potentially provide insights for a new theoretical framework.

One caveat of the Life History Analysis method pertains to its reliability: since the research data is mostly derived from oral expressions, there are legitimate doubts on how individual narratives
might accurately represent the story of entire communities. In such cases, literature research might be effective in supplementing individual claims with further context and triangulation. Most importantly, understanding the limitations of Life History Analysis becomes a constant reminder for the researcher to maintain objectivity, as intensive interaction with respondents are likely to lead researchers sympathizing with their respondents’ conditions.

Similar to Lewis, I also profiled the families of my research and sat in with them. Yet unlike Lewis, I chose one to two households as my core respondents from the onset. Throughout my fieldwork, I stayed in a widower’s house, who lived with her children. I followed her all day to understand her scope of activities and how she carries them out, while also taking notes of particular statements that convey her feelings of her daily life. These observations brought me to understand the economic conditions of rural agrarian communities in Gunungkidul, and that of highlander women in particular.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY CULTURE IN GUNUNGKIDUL

One important point of poverty culture in Gunungkidul is the stagnant social mobilization of its residents, especially in the agriculture-dependent southern parts of the Regency. More recently, the northern part of Gunungkidul has experienced better socio-economic conditions due to a boom of tourist villages (Jati 2016). Nonetheless, the locals themselves merely work for external investors, meaning that their vertical social mobility are largely the byproduct of external factors.

The research subjects of this paper live in the southern part of Gunungkidul. The area is defined by remote, isolated settlements scattered across vast highlands. This topographical condition hinders peasants from accessing other areas beyond their settlement: it takes about 4 to 5 hours to reach the Regency capital of Wonosari to access better public services, which subsequently causes complex structural problems such as ineffective poverty alleviation efforts and uneven economic development. The local government believes that investment

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and infrastructure will help to eradicate poverty in the area, but their programs have not been proven to overcome these geographically-created structural problems which hinders social mobility.

Aside from structural determinants, poverty in Gunungkidul has also been attributed to cultural factors. If the former pertains to widening social gap and unequal access, the latter concerns how poor people are inclined to maintain pre-existing patterns of social relations instead of figuring ways to ramp up their social status. Studies on the cultural factors of poverty in Gunungkidul in particular and Javanese society in general have been conducted by contemporary scholars (Maarif Institute, 2007; Widyatsari, 2015; Khadafi and Mutiarin, 2017), but also has also informed classical literature in the field of anthropology, such as the work of Clifford Geertz in 1960s. In his ethnography of Javanese communities, Geertz pointed out that poor Javanese peasants lack in resources and assets for generating wealth, but simultaneously desires to share their little amount of resources to relatives and neighbors. While such philanthropic attitude reflects the strong social support system in rural areas, Geertz also pointed out that such “leveling” of poverty entails that individual households are unlikely to reach better life standards. In other words, the cost of a strong social bond amongst villagers is the perpetual deferment of one’s social mobility.

One can posit that structural factors (the lack of state-provided services and mechanisms of social protection) contributes to the continuation of “shared poverty” as a cultural factor. After all, distribution of income among villagers functions as an internal social protection mechanism—particularly in the absence of external ones. While immediate families and close relatives comprise the smallest unit of income distribution, the network of mutual aid tends to extend to larger circles and eventually encompass neighboring communities. Furthermore, the demographic homogeneity of peasants enables each member of a village to identify one another’s needs. For example, the fluctuating harvest periods in Gunungkidul is a cause of concern for each individual, making it easy to deduce that one’s neighbors might
be in a similar state of dire need: all that is left to do is to check in on them, or conversely, ask for help.

There is a limit in how these informal systems of social care are able to keep entire communities afloat, and each peasant is still required to work hard in order to meet their daily need of consumption. However, these systems of mutual aid perform a latent—and perhaps more significant—cultural function beyond immediate income distribution. The affirmation of social bonds itself takes their mind off the structural barriers of social mobility, allowing peasants to weather through uncertain economic periods in their remote settlements by clinging to their microcosmic community. Social interactions are quintessential for small Gunungkidul communities to maintain a sense of balance in life, providing them with a sense of contentment and wellbeing in spite of living under impoverished conditions with little-to-no way out.

Table 2 below demonstrates the occupation of poor villagers in Gunungkidul Regency. While most peasants, including women, work in agriculture, peasants also have to work in other sectors such as construction to gain income in the middle-periods between planting and harvest. Nonetheless, some peasants will be left unemployed as the number of services needed at any given time might be limited, and peasant communities tend to lack the required skills to perform other types of jobs to diversify their income source.
Table 2: Occupation of Poor Villagers in Gunungkidul Regency

Source: (Jati et al. 2018)

While the majority of Gunungkidul residents work in the agriculture sector, economic growth in the Regency is highly concentrated in the service and commerce sectors located in urban areas (Jati 2016; Maarif Institute 2007). Such discrepancy between sectors with the most labor forces and sectors that experience growth indicates the possibility for poor villagers to move to urban areas for better income. While service sectors such as tourism had begun to reach rural areas and might absorb unemployed peasants in-between harvest periods, their contribution to the economy of Gunungkidul remains miniscule. These discrepancies also belie the need for effective policy innovations. Indonesia’s centralized approach towards tackling poverty means that sub-national governments are largely required to follow or
adopt the same policies and approaches of the central government. The three common programs for poverty alleviation, namely empowerment, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) incubation, as well as social aid also demonstrates the incremental approach of dealing with poverty (Zakiyah, 2010). Instead of targeting structural problems, the lopsided focus on providing social aid such as direct cash transfers and allocation of basic staple needs are at risk of failing to accommodate the entire population, especially those living in rural and remote areas, but also provide cultural barriers against more wide-ranging social transformation as poor sectors of the populace become heavily dependent on the government. Poor villagers have been documented to rely on state-provided social assistance to fulfill their livelihoods even more than their own income from farm work (Zamroni et al. 2015).

Without efforts to foster economic conditions that would raise the income of the lower strata, the poor are likely to become poorer over time. As such, orthodox interventions will likely prove to be inadequate in the long run as state-provided social aid is inherently unsustainable—especially when it is required to bear all the externalities of the economy—while poor villagers become mentally unaccustomed in adapting to the demands brought by socioeconomic transformation after years of feeling inferior and helpless. Even if the state begins to solve the aforementioned structural issues, the “cultural problem” would likely persist for marginalized members of the poor, such as women and children, as the initial direct beneficiaries of social mobility are likely to be men. Imbalance of power amongst the rural poor can be seen, among others, by the prevalence of undernourishment and domestic violence (Khadafi and Mutiarin 2017).

In a nutshell, there is a disconnection between the aims of existing policies and their outcomes (Jati, 2016; Zamroni et al. 2015). Overall, policymakers tend to posit rural poverty as a gap between economic growth in urban and rural areas; as such, redistribution of money and social aid are believed to be able to fill in these gaps and drive economic activity in rural communities. Yet for the peasants themselves, poverty is not merely a material problem: what is at stake is how they are gradually exposed and required to adapt with the rapidly-modernizing
world and make use of public services that they have never experienced before (Jati et al. 2018). Gunungkidul peasants often describe their condition as that between “kekurangan” (lacking) and “cekap” (enough). While rural communities often describe themselves as kekurangan, or living in impoverishment, they do not contrast poverty with abundant wealth, but by simply feeling satisfied with being able to satisfy their daily needs; that everything is cekap (Sastroatmodjo, 2006; Putri, 2020; Rakhmawati, 2022). Usually, highland peasants would feel cekap during harvest time and kekurangan throughout other times of the year, especially during the dry months and water supply is scarce.

As peasants see subsistence and not abundance as the opposite of impoverishment, poverty alleviation might benefit from focusing less on immediate economic gains and more on the establishment of public services in rural communities—such as infrastructure, technology, or healthcare—to help peasants escape poverty at their own pace. This mechanism also takes into account the invaluable strong network of social support that is already in place, putting emphasis on providing peasants with more resources (which they can collectively manage) rather than overhauling entire systems of living. If a culture of poverty is manifested in the absence of social mobility due to customs of sharing limited resources, a potential solution lies not in encouraging peasants to cease acts of social sharing, but in setting up systems to generate more resources.

THE POOR HIGHLANDER WOMEN OF GUNUNGKIDUL

After reviewing the condition of poverty in Gunungkidul Regency, this section will highlight how poor highlander women experience such impoverishment. During our previous fieldwork in Gunungkidul, me and my team managed to identify five women for ethnographic research due to their status as breadwinners of female-headed households. Some of them have also been divorced or abandoned.
### Table 3: Profile of Poor Highlander Women of Guningkidul

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number of Family Members</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Number of Dependents</th>
<th>Assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rugayati</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Junior High School (Grade 8)</td>
<td>1 Elder</td>
<td>Home inherited from parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1 Elder</td>
<td>Home inherited from parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjinem</td>
<td>Farmer (Disabled)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Junior High School (Grade 7)</td>
<td>1 Elder</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mursiyem</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Primary School (Grade 5)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Home inherited from parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamini</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Junior High School (Grade 7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Home inherited from husband</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: research data.

Amongst our list of interlocutors, I decided to focus on Mursiyem and Lamini due to several reasons. *First,* they are still relatives and can provide insights to one another’s condition. *Second,* they do not receive any support from their extended families, while Rugayati, Wage, and Marjinem all claimed to have received some aid. This selection is also informed by the already-extensive literature on mutual support among rural peasants in Java, in which Mursiyem and Lamini’s stories might shed a different light. *Third,* both Mursiyem and Lamini still exemplify the typical highlander woman of Guningkidul: both work in a patch of land around five kilometers away from their homes, where they
spend their time planting crops and foraging for cassavas. Throughout my fieldwork, I lived with them for a period of time, conversing and writing down their stories.

Mursiyem is a widow of three children. Her family lives in a traditional Javanese house (known as a limasan) located in the Saptosari Sub-District along with her father-in-law, whose shamanic abilities are renowned to be able to cure any diseases. Mursiyem is officially still married to her husband, Sugeng, but he has abandoned the family for over ten years; she admitted to have tried looking for her lost husband, but to no avail.

Mursiyem’s main daily activities are nduduh (looking for wildgrass to feed her cattle) and baon (farming in the forest area). In addition, she would accept odd jobs from her neighbors to ensure she can provide food for her family. Her typical day begins at dawn, when she usually heads to the nearest traditional market to sell foraged cassava. She explains her schedule to me while grabbing a sickle and cassava grater from the kitchen:

“During cassava season, I work from 1 pm until dusk. Meanwhile, in the other seasons, I work starting at dawn.”

Every day, Mursiyem can earn around Rp. 12,000 (USD 0.8), which she divides for paying back loans, providing meals for the family, and pocket money for her children. Two of her three children are still at school, and a substantial portion of her income (Rp. 10,000) will go for them: “if I don’t give money for my children to buy snacks, they will sulk and cry”. These expenses, which cannot be covered only by selling cassava, require Mursiyem to take extra jobs.

When asked about her expectations in life, Mursiyem claims to be grateful for what God has given her and her family. While acknowledging that her family is often kekurangan, Mursiyem says the local government has been of help, providing her with regular cash transfers, one cattle, and had even drilled a well for her to access water. These aid ensure that her family is able to survive in spite of her minuscule income. She is also close friends with two widows, Sutijah
and Sugini, and three would always baon for cassavas together. The three usually harvest a large number of cassavas during August to November; in other months, they would spend more time looking for grass for their cattle.

Mursiyem and her village is unaffected by the rural tourism boom, which has been concentrated on the northern parts of the Regency. Southern Gunungkidul, where Mursiyem lives, is far more remote and difficult to access. In her village, time almost seems to take a halt, as economic growth and modernization come in small ripples rather than droves. Ultimately, this means that Mursiyem is unlikely to find other sources of income to keep her family afloat—and all she can do is to solemnly carry out life as she knows it.

Lamini is a widow with three daughters. The eldest works in a medicine factory in Surabaya, East Java, while the younger two still attend high school and live with her. Lamini does not possess any specific skills, such as farming, and performs odd jobs for her neighbors for a living. She admits being very reliant on social aid programs, such as rice subsidy for poor citizens and School Operational Aid (BOS). These two programs cover over half of Lamini’s household income.

Lamini says she doesn’t have much expectations and hopes for her life: if anything, she just wants her daughters to fare better than she had. Being very conscious of her impoverishment, Lamini spends most of her time seeking refuge in prayer, requesting guidance and strength from God. As such, her outlook in life is “narimo ing pandum” through-and-through. The only thing that brings contentment to her life other than praying, she says, is to be able to keep her daughter fed and going to school.

From Mursiyem and Lamini, we conclude that the overall helplessness brought by poverty encourages them to entrust their well-being towards external factors (herein perceived as the state and “God”). While social assistance has undoubtedly helped in keeping them afloat, they remain unable to live a quality of life beyond day-to-day subsistence. Their limited skills and sources of income—which can be attributed due to the absence of a second, male breadwinner in the family—has shrunk their horizons and sense of possibilities, and forced
them to find meaning in impoverishment. This is, in a sense, “narimo ing pandum” as a culture of poverty. For poor women in particular, such learned helplessness cannot be separated from male dominance in society, which has left women without the necessary skills to thrive on their own.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how the conceptual notion of a “Culture of Poverty”, which was derived through studies of poor Mexican peasants by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, shares certain similar values and principles with the widely referred-to Javanese proverb of “narimo ing pandum”. Both concepts explain how poor people are able to remain resilient in their impoverishment, but also raises the possibility that the values enabling resilience itself—such as acceptance, patience, and gratitude—also reproduces inequalities, rendering the poor to remain in perpetual impoverishment.

My findings demonstrate how cultural values of the poor are manifested—and in turn, reinforced by—certain material apparatus. While poor villagers learn to accept their impoverishment, they also set up informal systems of mutual aid, which has been proven successful (albeit not always) in ensuring the survival of entire rural communities. These social bonds affirm the fact that one is not alone in their impoverishment, and induces a belief among poor peasants that they will eventually always be able to withstand periods of hardship. There is also a spiritual element of work, in which help from neighbors or state-provided social assistance is seen as manifestations of Divine generosity—that one’s impoverished condition in the microcosm is not isolated from the macrocosmic workings of God.

Nonetheless, Lewis’ groundbreaking exploration of a Culture of Poverty failed to consider the gendered elements of inequality. By focusing on poor highlander women, this research shows how our subjects’ perception of poverty is largely determined by their marginal status as women, which has prevented them from acquiring skills for survival. This results in a more intense state of learned helplessness, in
which “narimo ing pandum”—to put one’s fate in God—prevails as the way to make sense of one’s impoverishment. Ultimately, this worldview results in a paradoxical situation in which poor women are unable to survive without various forms of social assistance, yet these aid, however necessary, does not empower them and further perpetuates a culture of poverty.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


