

Never-ending Local Beauty: *Neo-Exoticism* in Tourism Activities and Online Media Narratives

Ikwan Setiawan¹, Andang Subaharianto²

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jember, East Java, Indonesia

² Faculty of Humanities Universitas Jember, East Java, Indonesia

¹ ikwansetiawan.sastra@unej.ac.id, ² andangsbh@yahoo.co.id

Abstract: This article aims to discuss the construction of cultural-related-locality discourses in tourism activities and media narratives that cannot be separated from market civilization in Indonesia. With the *post-colonial exotics* framework by Huggan (2001), we will analyze data derived from our field research in Banyuwangi regarding cultural activities undertaken by local actors in welcoming tourist. In addition, we will also analyze the data from online media narratives which bring the issues of local cultures and communities in Banyuwangi. We argue that through various cultural activities and media narratives under market civilization, local people and cultures are having new discursive constructions which emphasize the significance of beautiful, unique, attractive, exotic, traditional and glamorous cultural products with new invested-meanings that relate to the tourism market as well as the transformation the hegemonic stereotyping paradigm of eastern subject.

Keywords: *Banyuwangi, exotic, local cultures, tourism, media narratives*

Introduction

Since the early 2000s many local governments in Indonesia have promoted tourism packages offering various natural beauty and cultural uniqueness. Tourism is believed to increase governmental income and public welfare, either through lodging and restaurant, goods and services, and other necessities that are needed by tourists, both foreign and domestic. Online media become the important sites for introducing and promoting cultural beauty of a regency through a variety of news to attract potential tourists. Following the booming of tourism, both cultural workers—indigenous leaders, folk artists, and community activists—and capitalists seek to earn economic sustenance by creating tourism activities. This development, on the one hand, gives a hope because the active actors and the members of communities gain economic benefits from their involvement in artistic attractions or rituals presented to tourists. On the other hand, tourism activities that are too money-oriented will make the aspects of development and preservation of cultural diversity seem like merely formal activities because the parties concerned only think how make money by the coming of tourists. Of course, these assumptions are not final, because there may be a different understanding between the government officials and cultural workers in designing communal activities for the benefit of tourism.

Despite of the difference in viewpoint between the governments and cultural actors, the tourism industry in regional level as a hegemonic practice commonly requires locality—society, culture, and nature in the local space—with all its uniqueness as the main 'recipe' to succeed. Comaroff & Comaroff (2006) termed the condition as an *ethnicity inc* in which many governments officials and cultural actors in this planet pack much of their local richness to drive the tourism industries to increase income which is often said may improve the economic level of society, although in reality it benefits more large investors who build resorts, hotels, bungalows, home stays, or restaurants in locally grown areas of tourism activities. The mechanism of commodification becomes an important formula for making local complexity a diverse cultural product that can serve and satisfy travelers' desires for traditional experience instantly, although it must ignore the depth of its

philosophical meaning. That fact makes attributes related to communalism that is usually attached to the existence of local identity must be re-interpreted flexibly in order to be accepted by the tourism market.

Considering the above conditions, this article aims to discuss the discursive construction of local cultures in tourism activities and media narratives that cannot be separated from market civilization. We argue that through various cultural activities and media narratives under market civilization, locality is having new discursive constructions emphasizing beautiful, unique, attractive, exotic, traditional and glamorous cultural expressions with new invested-meanings that is not destroying the dominant stereotyping paradigm on the eastern subject, but supporting the economic goal as well as succeeding tourism industry.

Method of Analysis

With the *post-colonial exotics* framework by Huggan (2001), we will analyze data from our field research in Banyuwangi regarding cultural tourism agenda supported by government officials and cultural activities undertaken by local actors in welcoming tourist. In addition, we will also analyze the data from media narratives, especially online media, which bring the issues of local cultures in Banyuwangi. Following Huggan, we assume that conditions producing “neo-exoticism” in which cultural actors, bureaucrats, writers, journalists and other related subjects construct new aesthetic discourses and perceptions of peculiarity, diversity, traditionalism, primitiveness, and beauty attached to cultural products such as arts, rituals, culinary, crafts, clothing, and cultural-based creations as well as the natural beauty of the local area as the transformation of the colonial past in which a discontinuity emerges now because of the differences in economic and political interests. Within this framework, everything related to locality will be neatly constructed to serve the metropolitan yearning and curiosity of the atmosphere different from their daily lives. Although local societies and cultures can no longer be said to live in complete traditional reality because they have already believed and run a modern culture in hybrid subjectivity, the construction of traditional expression have been still displayed to satisfy metropolitan subjects. There are still communities that believe in and run a small part of local wisdom, such as certain rituals, but the news about them has also used a discursive framework that is influenced by tourism interests.

What needs to be noted—following Huggan (2001: 13)—is that the construction of the neo-exoticism will effectively continue to project of making a community, culture and nature a seemingly different place and contradict what is in life in the big cities. In fact, the discursive constructs presented can domesticate them and effectively produce otherness. The production of wisdom is dialectical and unified; in different times and different places, it may serve the conflicting ideological interests, provide a reason for the reconciliation, but legitimize with ease the need for loot and conquest roughly. Neo-exoticism, in this context, is understood as a semiotic and discursive circuit that sometimes resides in the the binary opposition between something strange and familiar. Inside this circuit, the strange and familiar, also including the relationships between them, can be depreciated to serve different political needs and purposes, even contradicting one another. All parties, although different in cultural movements or economic-political interests can take advantage of locality with various aspects and shapes to carry out interests that may be contradictory between one party with another, although we can also see which side is dominant in playing these neo-exotic issues.

Result and Discussion

The Exotic Local under the Tourists' Eyes

Since 2011, the Government of Banyuwangi Regency has created a cultural and tourism policies that have transformed the richness of local cultures and natural beauty in a variety of attractions following the global tourism market formulas. The government under the leadership of Regent Abdullah Azwar Anas (hereafter AAA) has mobilized locality as the major element to create many events to attract tourists, both foreign and domestic, as well as making income to the government and establishing his political interest (Setiawan, Tallapessy, & Subaharianto, 2017a, 2017b). The growth of tourism industry in Banyuwangi has been significant, so that more and more media reported various cultural activities, natural beauty, and other local events framed in *Banyuwangi Festival* (hereafter B-Fest). Many media reports also contributed to the enlargement of opinion about the more exotic and attractive of Banyuwanginese cultures. In line with the growth, some luxury facilities such as star hotels were built by national investors, such as Hotel Santika, Hotel Aston, and Hotel El-Royal. Several centers of souvenirs and handicrafts have also grown in order to obtain economic sustenance from the growth of tourism industry. Local communities in some villages also attempted to include their cultural events—either reviving long-dead traditions or creating new traditions—into B-Fest agenda for getting media coverage and government attention. Of course, they have created various additional performances to have more glamorous events. In addition, many indigenous actors in villages have begun making tourism activities to serve tourists who want to enjoy and experience exotic atmosphere.

Indeed, the village communities in Banyuwangi are hybrid subjects who are accustomed to enjoying modernity, but it does not mean forgetting ancestral heritage completely. In everyday life, villagers have been used to consume industrial products such as clothing, television, education, internet, and others. However, majority of them also still perform rituals. The annual communal rituals for salvation and praying for prosperity have been still being carried out. The government puts some annual agrarian rituals into the tourism agenda in B-Fest. Because there is already a tourism interest, we can analyze how the construction of unique and traditional cultures made by the perpetrators of rituals and journalists. Events that were initially the only way villagers to pray with all sincerity to the Lord of the Universe, who in the past were considered strange and unreasonable by colonial intellectuals, in the recent time, are featured in a more colorful with various additional attractions. The rituals become performances to attract tourists so that they can satisfy their longing for exoticism as well as get satisfaction because they can still find strangeness that they have not met directly in the metropolitan space.

Some annual agrarian rituals that have been included into the cultural tourism agenda since the New Order era until AAA's leadership are *Kebo-keboan* (a ritual involving male villagers who color their bodies with a black color resembling a buffalo in Aliyan Village, Rogojampi Subdistrict and Alasmalang Village, Singojuruh Subdistrict) and *Seblang* (a ritual involving a female dancer wearing traditional clothes and getting trance as a medium of communication with the spirit of the village guardian Olehsari Village and Bakungan Village, Glagah Subdistrict). As agrarian rituals, though different in form, they have a similar substance, offering prayers to the God Almighty for the villagers to be given safety and well-being, avoided from dangerous diseases and epidemics, and given the abundance of the harvest. In the modern perspective, all these rituals can be considered irrational because of the presence of supernatural forces that make the perpetrators experience trance. Although in the context of postmodernity the reality of cross-dimensional communication—between humans and other creatures and between real world and other possible

worlds—is not a strange thing (McHale 2004; Faris 2004), but for many metropolitan and local people the magical reality is still interesting to enjoy.

In *Kebo-keboan* the principle of strangeness and magic are still maintained as the traditional signifiers in the midst of modernity. They do not care how tourists call the rituals, whether exotic, irrational, supernatural, magical, or whatever, because the important thing for the villagers are how to continue the ancestral heritages that bind communal solidarity. The problem is the marginalization of the rituals' cultural power in agricultural works that should be prescribed by villagers in facing problems of farming or ecological problems because they are already familiar with modern agriculture (Setiawan, Tallapessy, & Subaharianto, 2017c). The traditional aspect that is still believed from this ritual is the seeds obtained by fighting over each other will make the harvest abundant. Moreover, *Kebo-keboan* has many additional aspects such as *Sri Suguh*, a dance to honor *Dewi Sri* (a goddess of fertility in Javanese mythology), and other traditional art performances (Fanani, 2017). For villagers and village apparatuses affected by the tourism perspective, traditional and potential creeds are invested with the meanings that temporarily freeze local subjects in order to bring many tourists. The sanctity of meaning and ecological potential are no longer a dominant ideal that must be maintained. In other words, villagers who have agreed on tourism formulas are stereotyping local cultures as the others with new meanings that also produce exoticism; not to satisfy the superiority of the Western subjects, but to satisfy their longing for something strange and magical that still exist in the midst of the Eastern communities.

For journalists of online media which require immediacy, preaching rituals within the framework of tourism means reducing enough space to describe its characteristics as well as its complexity. Narrative emphasis is directed to construct discourses about rituals that are unique and worth visiting by the tourists. Neo-exoticism, therefore, has a special recipe in the online media narrative because it has to adjust to the spatial problem and the time at which the spacial shortening makes the information about the uniqueness of local culture to be very limited. The peculiar and distinctive preference of exotic information from modern rationality becomes the first point to be conveyed to the readers.

Thousands of people packed Alasmalang Village, Singojuruh Subdistrict, Banyuwangi. They wanted to see the ritual that is about 300 years old, an indigenous ritual "Kebo-Keboan". The unique tradition that is always held at the beginning of Suro Month in Javanese calendar is an expression of gratitude for the abundant harvest ...Male villagers who dress up buffalo with black paint in all parts of their body paraded along with other arts typical of Banyuwangi. The event began with a thanksgiving and a meal together at the village road intersection. Furthermore, led by a local indigenous leader, 30 *kebo-keboan*, people who play and pretend to be buffalo, were paraded around the four corners of the village with the accompaniment of the tribe's distinctive music...The farmers who dressed like buffalo are believed getting trance. They walked like buffalo plowing the fields. They also wallowed, wrestled in the mud, and rolled along the way through. When walking on their shoulders plugged equipment installed. This ritual ended with a procession of plowing the fields and sowing the seeds of rice by buffaloes. In the process of rice seeds that would be sown by Dewi Sri, this would be much contested villagers, because they believed the seed would produce more abundant harvest. (Fanani, 2016, *our translation*)

The information above emphasizes the unique, different, strange, traditional, and primitive *Kebo-keboan* in Alasmalang. In modern thinking, those ritual activities, of course, can be considered irrational. However, the more irrational the more attractive and interesting. Tourists from outside Banyuwangi will get the visual beauty of a tradition that no longer exists in their lives. Narrative of exoticism is the main attraction that can strengthen and establish the stereotyping of local subjects in the midst of the great changes they experience in life. All the exotic flavors are hunted by journalists who become discursive subjects of the locality-based

tourism industry. Narration of online media news supported by various beautiful photographs becomes an important reference for tourists when they want to travel. Thus, information related to the uniqueness of a local community may, on the one hand, disseminate information to potential travelers, at regional, national and international levels. It is normal if the regional government is concerned with online media because of its wide readership. On the other hand, media information contributes to the simplification and stereotyping of exotic local communities and cultures, without narrating the complexity of the problems. All seem peaceful and prosperous, but behind the rituals there can be many problems faced by the perpetrators.

For the government, neo-exoticism may become the most significant discursive formula that will contribute to the success of cultural tourism. The stronger the local community maintains, conserves, and enlivens the annual ritual with all its philosophical arguments, the more tourists visiting with promotional and narrative promotion through online media. When a ritual enters the official government-made tourist agenda, the authorities quickly justify the greatness of the community and the contribution of the ritual to improving economic prosperity. Regent AAA, for example, said that Kebo-keboan becomes one of local wisdom that strengthens Banyuwangi culture (Fanani, 2016). This tradition which is packaged in a series of B-Fest agenda is not just to carry the tradition of the village to the city, but how this tradition can be a leverage instrument of villagers economy. The economic potential of tourism activity has always been the main reason for strengthening rituals. With the packaging of a primitive-look event, this tradition will invite many people come to this village. They do not only come from Banyuwangi but also tourists from outside the region. Thus, this activity will have an impact on the local economy. When many tourists come, the villagers may sell food, beverages, or other products. For that reason, the cohesiveness and the villagers' happiness to continue to maintain and run the ritual will be the main capital to gain the economic benefits of tourism. Even if we look further, the big investors who run the hotels, restaurants, or craft businesses get bigger economic benefits from foreign or domestic tourists. Meanwhile, the villagers only benefit from the activity of buying and selling food and beverages. The enlargement of economic benefits that citizens can enjoy becomes the mainstay of rationalization about the importance of preserving rituals. The mobilization of neo-exoticism in many media narratives and tourism activities is actually more exploited by the regional state regime with the greater economic goals.

Welcome to our exotic village

As a discursive subject of the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Banyuwangi, communities that are culturally unique begin to develop activities that provide economic benefits as well as contribute to the preservation of local culture. Cultural actors in the community—indigenous leaders, traditional artists, and community activists—play an important role in these developments. Cultural actors at the village level are not people who can only be the objects of the tourism industry run by the government. They have the ability to design and execute cultural activities to serve the tourists. The main formula they develop is the uniqueness of culture that can provide new experiences to the tourists. Each community chooses and develops particular tourism activities in accordance with their geo-cultural potential and characteristics. The choice is a strategy to attract tourists while competing with other communities in Banyuwangi.

One of the communities that creates interesting cultural activities is Lembaga Masyarakat Adat Osing (*Institute of Osing Indigenous Community*, hereafter LEMAO) with its Rumah Budaya Osing (the *Osing Culture House*, hereafter RBO), in Kemiren Village, Glagah District, Banyuwangi. Purwadi, Chair of LEMAO, has made a gathering where most domestic tourists and a small number of foreigners gather to enjoy the special dishes of Osing community. In the event, the

tourists were also entertained by the *gandrung* arts, a profane social dance which became one of the Osing cultural identities and the local identity of Banyuwangi. Purwadi, the leader of LEMAO, decided to make tradition-oriented-tourism activities because the tourism policies made by the state regime, from the New Order era to the post-Reform era, have been less in favor of community development. Indeed, Kemiren—asan Osing Tourism Village which has been endorsed since 1997—under AAA regime also has gotten governmental intention in tourism agenda, but the programs in the forms of incorporation of an annual ritual *Tumpeng Sewu* (a thousand of shaped like a mountain) dan the top-down creation of *Kopi Sepuluh Ewu* (ten thousands coffee cups) in B-Fest have not given much economic benefits. For this reason, Purwadi and his partners in LEMAO, since some years ago have created an incidental tourism program based on Osing culinary and folk arts for serving the tourists who come to RBO. Residents, both women and men, involve in cooking and serving food as well as giving entertainment, *gandrung* dance. After the event, they will get an honorarium according to the portion of each job.

Exotic flavors are obtained by tourists from various types of culinary—food, snacks and drinks—and *gandrung* performance. Together, tourists consume various traditional foods and drinks while sitting on traditional mats. The longing of tourists coming from Indonesia's big cities towards traditional culinary can be realized in an atmosphere of intimacy when they can joke and laugh together. The agility of the movements of some young *gandrung* dancers and the traditional Osing music merge exotic energy to the tourists. Many of them participated in dancing with the *gandrung* dancers. This participatory performance raises an atmosphere of togetherness and solidarity that is increasingly scarce in individual life in the metropolitan spaces. Life that *seems* traditional indeed presents an exotic atmosphere that can briefly enchant the souls of tourists. Why did we say *seems*? Tourists and villagers are no longer traditional people who are fully bound by the laws and traditions of ancestral heritage. Villagers are in-between subjects who are used to use modern tablewares and food containers. *Gandrung* dance is not performed at all times before the public; only performed when citizens have a celebration in the rituals of the life cycle, especially marriage and circumcision.

By using the principle of neo-exoticism, local people who are actually no longer intact as subjects, consciously strengthen the traditional identity that still lives in their community to be used as “display” and “merchandise” items that provide economic benefits to the local actors and communities’ members. Indeed there is an aspect of preservation that is carried out, but local culture is understood not to mention the philosophical and ecological meanings as a whole. Instead, following the logic of welfare in the tourism industry, local culture is an aesthetic product that can be used to strengthen the community economically; a form of economic principle hegemony in cultural activity. As a strategy to take advantage of tourism trends, what they do can indeed be read as the flexibility of subjects who do not want to be just spectators. They, following the principle of tourism, also have the right to be the subjects who can carry out cultural activities that are idealized capable of preserving ancestral heritage as well as providing additional income.

Conclusion

Various cultural tourism agendas made by many local governments as the hegemonic practices that have influenced local actors and community members, admittedly or not, have produced the discourse and practice of neo-exoticism. To legitimize the economic objectives behind cultural tourism activities, the government and local actors will usually use the pretext of preservation which also provides benefits for improving the welfare of local people, even though clear calculations have never been given. Indeed, community actors and members have benefited, but the nominal amount is not too large. Instead, the investors of hotels take huge benefit from the

coming of the tourists from metropolitan cities in Indonesia and abroad. In this context, neo-exoticism is a discursive and praxis strategy to continuously produce images, meanings, and knowledge of the beauty of local culture which is not solely to show the still strong identity and communal solidarity. Furthermore, neo-exoticism is the use of local cultural diversity—as well as natural beauty—to succeed in economic interests driven by the governments, investors and local actors, although the latter actually only become the subjects being hegemonized by the tourism industry discourses and do not want just being the spectators.

Neo-exoticism really benefits from the reality of hybridity taking place in local communities where people still love and practice some of the traditions of their ancestors in the midst of the modernity they normally consume. The high spirit to preserve local culture is a strategic-ideological strength that can be used as a basic material to normalize the strengthening of neo-exoticism through tourism activities. Thus, a neo-exoticism-based cultural policy seems to be able to support conservation practices as desired by the community, but the main objective of the government is actually to increase investment and income from the tourists. This fact confirms that if it is not managed properly, the neo-exoticism-based cultural policies only provide greater economic benefits to investors, while local actors and community members who are encouraged to continue developing culture only get “crumbs scattered” from the tourism industry.

References

- Comaroff, J.L. & Jean Comaroff. (2006). *Ethnicity Inc*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fanani, A. (2017). “Ritual adat Kebo-keboan dibanjiri ribuan penonton”. <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-3666033/ritual-adat-kebo-keboan-di-banyuwangi-dibanjiri-penonton>, retrieved on February 5, 2018.
- Fanani, A. (2016). “Menilik Tradisi Kebo-keboan, Warisan Leluhur Alasmalang Berusia 300 Tahun”. <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-3311632/menilik-tradisi-kebo-keboan-warisan-leluhur-alasmalang-berusia-300-tahun>, retrieved on February 5, 2018.
- Faris, W.B. (2004). *Ordinary enchantments: Magical realism and the remystification of narratives*. Nashville (USA): Vanderbilt University Press.
- Huggan, Graham. (2001). *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- McHale, Brian. (2004). *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Setiawan, Ikwan, Albert Tallapessy, & Andang Subaharianto. (2017a). “The Mobilization of Using Cultures and Local Government’s Political-Economy Goals in Post-Reformation Banyuwangi”. *Humaniora*, Vol. 29, No.1, pp. 12-23.
- Setiawan, Ikwan, Albert Tallapessy, & Andang Subaharianto. (2017b). “Exertion of Culture and Hegemonic Power in Banyuwangi: The Midst of Postmodern Trends”. *Karsa*, Vol. 25 No.1, pp. 147-178.
- Setiawan, Ikwan, Albert Tallapessy, & Andang Subaharianto. (2017c). “The Crisis of Ecological Meaning in Traditional Rituals under Tourism Regime in Post-Reformation Indonesia”. A paper presented at *The 2nd International Conference on Arts, Language, and Culture*, hosted by Universitas Negeri Sebelas Maret (UNS), Surakarta, November 4, 2017. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20961/proceedingcalc.v2i1.16062>.