

Commodification of Ngaben Culture in Bali

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Abstract: *The change of Ngaben (cremation) ceremony practice by preparing all of offerings together, at the same time as an education for young generation to make offerings (bebantenan), because making offerings (banten) is a part of Balinese cultures that should be preserved and inherited to the next generation. The change occurs because of the society life style and the increasing economy status of the people, which causes everything, should be measured by money. The change of Balinese Hindus is in the preparation of offerings which has bought from the banten-maker or well-known as “nunaspuput”. It is practical and economical although the value of togetherness and sacred value of making banten to the Sang Yajamana has gone. It is a dilemma for the existence of Balinese culture in the future, because Ngaben ceremony is a form of Yadnya (sacred sacrifice), and considered as an obligation to conduct, which is related to spiritual phenomenon from Schreurs (2002) who defined spiritual phenomenon as personal relationship upon transcendent entity. Spiritual includes individual inner life, idealism, attitude, thought, feeling and expectation upon the Almighty God. The essence of Ngaben ceremony is a deconstruction of hegemony discourse within the people, deconstruction upon hegemony tradition in Ngaben ceremony is started from the rise of philosophical consideration of the people which was started by the emerging understanding of the people upon religious literature. This understanding generates other interpretations such as economic, social or educational interpretation. The practice of Ngaben ceremony is very important because it can develop as well as educational media so there will be people and young generation’s awareness upon essential values from Ngaben ceremony.*

Keywords: Commodification, Ngabenculture in Bali

1. Introduction

Mass *Ngaben* ceremony has changed since 2000s, in which in the beginning it was practiced and prepared by those who had *sawa* (family member who would be cremated), such as preparation of offerings related to *Ngaben* ceremony was conducted together, so unconsciously there was an education to the young generation to make offerings (*bebantenan*), because making offerings (*banten*) is a part of Balinese cultures, that should be preserved and inherited to the next generation. The change occurs because of the society life style and the increasing economy status of the people, which causes everything, should be measured by money. As in the following picture, it was one of mutual relationships in making ceremony means and as a preservation of Balinese culture.



Lately, this phenomenon not only happens in urban area. It happens because of the limited time of Balinese Hindus in preparing offerings. So, most of Balinese Hindus buy *banten* from the *banten*-maker or well-known as “*nunaspuput*”. Young generations are questioning, why the practice of Hindu in Bali in form of ritual/ceremony becomes so difficult and expensive.

The practice “model” of urban Balinese Hindus in conducting *Yadnya* looks familiar such as: rent a tent, chair, catering, and

nunaspuput in *Geria* completed with the *Sulinggih*. It is practical and economical although the value of togetherness and sacred value of making *banten* to the *Sang Yajamana* has gone.

Based on the above description, it is a dilemma for the existence of Balinese culture in the future, because *Ngaben* ceremony is a form of *Yadnya* (sacred sacrifice), and considered as an obligation to conduct, which is related to spiritual phenomenon from Schreurs (2002) who defined spiritual phenomenon as personal relationship upon transcendent entity. Spiritual includes individual inner life, idealism, attitude, thought, feeling and expectation upon the Almighty God.

2. Theory and Discussion

Principally human is a religious and spiritual creature (*homo religious and homo spirituality*). It is proven by their ability to understand and reach the transcendent entity, which beyond and handle them. This ability causes the human to be able to experience ecstasy (natural or supra-natural), when he/she meets something different and does not come from ordinary world and experience. This totally different and not coming from ordinary world of the human is known as religious experience (Hardjana, 2005:28—29). It is the content and essence of religious experience, appreciation to the God makes the people to have capability, ability, and sensitivity to recognize and comprehend the existence of the Almighty God (Maman, et al., 2006:1).

Therefore, religious experience is a knowledge of human about “Something” beyond themselves, which exceeds and overcome them, the Transcendent, the Almighty, which is gained directly through conscious relation between themselves and that “Something” beyond themselves. The other “Something”, the Transcendent, the Almighty, in religious language is called as the God. According to Rudolf Otto (in

Pals, 2001:32; Hardjana, 2005:30) when experiencing the Transcendent, human experiences two contrary feelings. In one side, human interest to the Transcendent *fascinosum*, full of charm, but in other side human feels scared because the Transcendent is *tremendum*, full of force. However further religion is comprehended more to be *tremendum* than *fascinosum*. Furthermore, Hardjana (2005:45) emphasized that this religious knowledge and experience create religiosity which means the feeling and consciousness of relation and bond back of human to God. It is stated "relation" because by religious experience the human knows the relation between themselves and God who have created and gave existence; and it is stated "bond" because human is willing to bond themselves with God as the life source, executant, and purpose.

The religiosity is the essence and source of religion, which is a feeling and consciousness of relation and bond back human to God because human has recognized and re-experienced the God and believe the Him (Hardjana, 2005:51). It is the reason for Kahmad (2000:63) to state that religion is a sacred shade which protect human from chaos. For the believers, religion contains teaching of highest truth (*summumbonum*) and absolute about human existence as well as life guidance to survive in the world and afterlife, which means piety to God, civilized and humanized. It means, religion is cultured since religion is symbolic universe which gives meaning to human life and the most holistic and comprehensive explanation about entire reality. Besides considering dogma and doctrine, religion also proposes moral guidance to live in social world in order to actualize goodness, safety, and prosperity for all.

Likewise, Hardjana (2005:51) emphasizes that the conscious appreciation of relation and bond back to God created religion with its four main elements namely, dogma, doctrine or teachings; worship or cults; moral or ethics; and institution or organization. Dogma formulates the nature of God who is recognized, experienced, believed, and His will for the human and the world. Worship establishes the necessary way for structuring the relation between human and God, such as where and when the relation is established, as well as the way and form of relation between human and God is conducted. Religious moral lines attitude guidance, which is a guidance to establish appropriate or not-appropriate behavior with the experience and belief to God in private, society and world life. Further, religious institution arranges relation among the believers as well as their relation with their religious leaders in the frame of mutual religiosity appreciation.

Hindus comprehension can be done through three approaches namely comprehension of *tattwa* of religious philosophy, ethics, and offerings or ceremony. Meanwhile, economy activity based on theory consisted of three activities namely creating/producing, distributing and finishing or consuming. Religious comprehension through offerings is genuinely a consuming activity in the field of economy activity. If it utilizes *venn* diagram, both activities are overlapping. It means religious comprehension through offerings is a ritual consumption expenses if it is considered from economy

perspective. Does it mean that making offerings is economy activity? On the other side, offerings is *Yadnya* or human offerings upon five elements of life namely God, holy man (*Rsi*), human, underworld and animal. These five *Yadnya* are well-known as '*PancaYadnya*' or five kinds of offerings, namely *Dewa Yadnya*, *RsiYadnya*, *ManusaYadnya*, *PitraYadnya*, *PitraYadnya* and *ButhaYadnya*. The frequency of *Dewa Yadnya* ritual is the offerings to the Almighty God and all of His manifestation in a year of *Isaca* (420 days) consisted of 108 days. This activity is a routine holiday such as *purnama* (full moon), *tilem* (new moon), *coma ribek* (onday-kliwon), *tumpek* (Saturday-kliwon), *Saraswati*, *Galungan*, *Kuningan* and so on.

Besides that, there is other non-routine ritual such as building temple, inaugurating temple, and worshiping holiday (*sanggah*) or *odalan*. *ManusaYadnya* ritual consisted of 11 activities started from new born baby, umbilical cord disconnection, marriage until soul purification (*pewintenan*). If all of these *PancaYadnya* are conducted properly so almost a third of time of the Balinese Hindus family is spent for ritual activities (Sukarsa, 2005c).

One of offerings implementations in Bali is about *Ngaben* considered from time allocation for man and woman, the total needs of some certain goods for *Dewa Yadnya*, total expenses for the ceremony per-family per year and research about how the influence of income and religious comprehension upon the expenses of offerings. *Ngaben* ceremony in Bali is a compulsory religious activity that should be done by the family for the deceased. There are some levels of ceremony depending on the kinds and offerings completeness namely big (*utama*), middle (*madya*), and small (*kanista*). Although the implementation is different in term of its level but the purpose is the same to unite with the Almighty God and world prosperity (Sukarsa, 2005b).

Mass *Ngaben* conducted by Balinese especially Hindus people has education purpose for the people, in the mass *Ngaben* ceremony, people do everything together. Structurally, this shared activity involves many skills and ability from the involved people in mass *Ngaben* to prepare the offerings for *Ngaben* until the ceremony procession. Thought this interaction and shared activity, people are exchanging experience and knowledge (social experience).

In this shared activity, there is also transfer process of experience and skill from the experienced person about *Ngaben* ceremony to the lay person about *Ngaben* ceremony and other ceremonies related to prepare offerings. In every *Ngaben* ceremony, there is transformation process of any kinds of skills to the next generation, for example knowledge and skill of making *banten* or offerings, food, and other ceremonial means. All of these skills can be transformed from generation to next generation or delivered to lay person about the ceremony facilities and infrastructure (*Ngaben*).

With the development of economy social life of Balinese people, there are many custom cases such as *kesepekang*

(isolation), graveyard dispute and so on. To overcome this, *Ngaben* crematorium is chosen. It is because the people are disputing about the right of graveyard use. Sometimes, there are conflicts among villages in Bali. Mostly, it is caused by the dispute of customary status of village member or other issue, inability of the people to conduct *Ngaben* because of conflict or other reason, or the expensive cost of *Ngaben*. Crematorium becomes the realistic solution to overcome the economic problem of high cost of making *bade* (corpse transportation) or cremating the deceased.



Crematorium no longer uses *bade* to transport the body which is replaced by ambulance. The cost can be economized. The cost of crematorium is definite, 1-20 million rupiah. By this method, *Ngaben* can be conducted (merging *PancaMahaButha Alit* of human body to be *Panca Maha Bhuta Agung* of the universe). With that way, the cost, time, energy and psychological fatigue can be avoided.



In other side, the existence of crematorium will change the perspective and paradigm of the people which is originally utilized to help people with conflict and other reason, but it is lately emerging as an economical and efficient choice of *Ngaben* considered from perspective of spending cost, time and energy because it has been managed based on people's economy condition. *Ngaben* in crematorium does not consider stats and caste of the people, they are treated the same.

Ngaben in crematorium by choosing the available package is a Balinese cultural shift to be economy and a business by ruling out religious values of Balinese culture, as well as opening opportunity to young generation to be further away from their own culture, they are getting lost from their own culture and finally Balinese culture will be lost because everything is measured by money.

3. Conclusion

The essence of *Ngaben* ceremony is a deconstruction of hegemony discourse within the people, deconstruction upon hegemony tradition in *Ngaben* ceremony is started from the rise of philosophical consideration of the people which was started by the emerging understanding of the people upon religious literature. This understanding generates other interpretations such as economic, social or educational interpretation.

The practice of *Ngaben* ceremony is very important because it can develop as well as educational media so there will be people and young generation's awareness upon essential values from *Ngaben* ceremony.

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