

Cultural Artifacts and the Values of Its Sacred for the Asmat Tribe Community in Papua: Novels by Ani Sekarningsih

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Abstract: This research aimed at describing and interpreting the sacred values of cultural artifacts for society of Asmat Tribe in Papua. The approach used was literary anthropology approach by utilizing the Clifford Geertz's concept. Research data sourced from 2 ethnographic novels by Ani Sekarningsih entitled *Namaku Teweraut* (2000) and *Osaka Anak Asmat* (2002). Utilizing the descriptive interpretative method, the data analysis done by three stages, namely: first, reading novels intensively while identifying cultural artifact, second, deeply understanding parts which is identified, and third, interpreting the meaning behind every cultural artifact. The research revealed 4 kinds of cultural artifacts which had values of sacred for Asmat Tribe community, they are sculpture, ancestors milestone statue or *mbis*, custom home *jew*, and body decoration. The findings explain that the sculpture for Asmat is a form of harmony of life with natural surroundings, as well as the spiritual embodiment of Asmat community to the ancestors. Further, Ancestors milestone statue or *mbis* contain spiritual values because it is believed as a place of ancestors' spirit reside while the custom home *jew* containing sacred values as a centre of tradition. The last, the body decoration is a symbol of self-unification with natural surroundings and environment. The sacred value of cultural artefacts for the Asmat tribe community essentially departs from five main functions, namely the spiritual function, ecological function, aesthetic function, social function, and economic function.

1 INTRODUCTION

Namaku Terawut (2000) and *Osakat Anak Asmat* (2002) novel by Ani Sekarningsih can be categorized as an ethnographic novel because containing depth description about a culture, especially Asmat Tribe in Papua. Various patterns of life and cultural system of Asmat Tribe describe in those novels, including depth description about cultural artifact which it sacred by local society. Cultural artifact is one of cultural element which is very prominent in Asmat Tribe society. Even, cultural artifact being one of the culture hallmarks of Asmat Tribe society in Papua. Cultural artifact existence for local society not just a mere formality or artistic expression, but it has value and depth meaning. That is why, every cultural artifact in Asmat tribe being something which very sacred. It is related with believed system of local society.

Literary study that specifically discusses the cultural artifacts of the Asmat tribe has never been conducted before. Several previous relevant literary

studies only discuss other aspects of Asmat culture. Even then, it does not deeply discuss the meaning behind it. Study conducted by Malawat and Mofu (2018) focuses on the variety of Asmat traditions or customs contained in the novel *Namaku Teweraut* by Ani Sekarningsih. The approach used to analyze the novel is the anthropological approach to literature. Didipu (2018) conducts a study that discusses the culture of the Asmat tribe in Papua. However, this study only focuses on the aspect of the Asmat traditional ceremonial procession contained in the novel *Namaku Teweraut* by Ani Sekarningsih. Hutabarat, Rafli, and Roman (2019) examines the socio-cultural value of the Asmat tribe in the novel *Namaku Teweraut* by Ani Sekarningsih through the anthropological approach to literature.

The relevance of the three previous studies with this study lies on: (1) the object of the novel, (2) the research problem, and (3) the approach or theory used. First, the three previous studies and this study take the same object which was the novel *Namaku Teweraut* by Ani Sekarningsih. The difference is,

this study uses another novel from Ani Sekarningsih which is *Osakat Anak Asmat*. Second, the problem studied in three previous studies and this study describes the culture of the Asmat tribe. If the previous studies take the issue of tradition, traditional ceremonial processions, and socio-cultural values of the Asmat tribe, this study focuses on the aspect of cultural artefacts of the Asmat tribe. This study does not only provide descriptions but also reveals the meaning of the sacred values of each cultural artifacts. Third, both previous studies and this study use the anthropological approach to literature. The difference is, this study utilizes Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropological theory as a supporting theory so that cultural explanation is not limited to superficial descriptions of a culture (1973).

The concept of culture, according to Geertz, is patterns of meaning contained in symbols. The symbol itself, as explained by Geertz (1973), refers to every object, action, event, quality, or relationship that becomes a tool for a conception in the form of symbolic "meaning". Symbols and meanings are the common property of every member of the society or, in other words, public. Therefore, understanding culture means exploring how meaning is produced symbolically (Barker, 2013). As a symbolic system that is meaningful, cultural processes must be read / understood, translated, and interpreted (Kuper, 2000).

This research aimed at describing cultural artifact and interpreting of its sacred values for Asmat tribe community in Papua. To reveal the cultural artifact and its sacred values or Asmat tribe society in Papua used literary anthropology approach with utilize Clifford Geertz symbolic interpretative concept. Literary anthropology is literary interdisciplinary approach which specially examines and analyzes various human cultural aspects in a literary works. Characteristics of literary anthropology, according to Markowski and Pawel (2012), depart from the fact that literature is a space where human nature itself is revealed, or in other words, human discover its essence through literature. In the perspective of literary anthropology, literary works are considered as anthropological documents that inform us about human existence (Maryl, 2012). The main purpose is to reveal and understand various humans/society cultural phenomenon which is interpreted by literary works. In this case, literary works assumed as representation from various cultural phenomenon which surround the process of creating literary works

2 RESEARCH METHOD

The method which used in this research was interpretative descriptive method. This method was used to give detail description about various cultural artifacts and interpret the meaning or sacred values or Asmat Tribe community in Papua. Data resources of this research were two ethnographic novels by Ani Sekarningsih which entitled *Namaku Tewateraut* (2000) and *Osakat Anak Asmat* (2002). The were analyzed in three stages. The first, reading the novels intensively while identifying cultural artifacts, second deeply understanding parts which are identified, and third, interpret the meaning behind every cultural artifacts.

3 RESULT

3.1 Art of Carving

Carving art which is poured by Asmat tribe through neither statues nor other sacred objects like a series of prayers that are praised to The Creator over the blessings of nature that always sustains life the whole of Asmat society. For Asmat tribe society, carving artist like the religious scholars whose find a secret behind the mystery. Carving artist of Asmat tribe none other than diggers of the messages of the universe which presented by The Creator through an abundance of natural wealth and surround environment. Sculpture for the Asmat society is only intermediaries to relate vertically to the God, and horizontally between each society and environment.

Hasil suatu ukiran tidak ubahnya sebagai mediator lantaran kepercayaan yang sudah mendarah daging pada masyarakat tentang hubungannya dengan sistem kepercayaan tradisional murni, sebagai salah satu unsur kebudayaan dalam tatanan masyarakatku yang masih berlaku. Yaitu alat untuk mengikat sikap perbuatan para leluhur yang akrab dengan tata cara hidup yang masih berlaku serta sering hadir dalam mimpi-mimpi masyarakat desa (Sekarningsih, 2000).

The result of a carving not unlike as mediator because of belief that is ingrained in society about their relationship with pure traditional believed system, as one of cultural element in the society order which is still valid. That is tools to bind the attitude of ancestral deeds who are familiar with the way of life is still valid and

come to the dream of villagers (Sekarningsih, 2000).

Carving art for Asmat tribe society in Papua is an art expression and aesthetic. It is related to the nature of sculpture as one of art form. Carving art for Asmat tribe society is one of the ways to reveal love for beauty, especially to their beautiful nature. This can be known from Asmat carving detail which much to presenting the beauty of their nature. For local society, carving art has been inseparable part from their life, like the existence of natural environment which provides everything for their survival.

Besides that, carving art is a society spiritual manifest. It is related with symbolic meaning which containing behind physically shape of the sculpture. Asmat society Papua believes that carving art is a media or container of the spirits o the ancestors. Even though it has not present in real object, or has been lie in other world, Asmat society still very confident that the ancestors spirits can still come back in real life and give blessing for local society. Those spirits can reuse again into the statues which carved. That is why, sculpture of the statue for Asmat society is a sacred monument. The more perfect the details of a carving, the greater the luck and happiness that the person with the statue will receive. Such is the belief that applies to the Asmat community of Papua.

3.2 Ancestors Stump Statue or *Mbis*

Mbis statue or ancestors stump statue is one of cultural artifacts which is very famous in Asmat tribe society Papua. Not only because of the art value of carving or sculpture on the statue, but also the mystical value that is believed by the local community. According to Asmat society belief, *mbis* statue is a place or container for dripping the ancestor spirits which give blessing, safety, protection, and happiness for local society. The *mbis* statue's making through the traditional ceremony which it is sacred by Asmat society that is *mbis pokmbu* ceremony or the ancestors stump traditional ceremony. Asmat society very sacred of this traditional ceremony, even it considered to be main ceremony of many ritual ceremonies.

Semua itu sudah menjadi masa silam dan apakah roh mbis yang mengantarkan berkat dan sejahtera atas desa-desa itu masih dapat bertahan membingkai ruang dalam nilai baru? Demikianlah, sampai sekarang upacara mbis masih merupakan upacara induk di antara

sekian banyak upacara ritual (Sekarningsih, 2000).

All of that has been past and is the *mbis* spirit which delivered blessing and joy to the villages still can stand framing the space in the new value? So it is, until today *mbis* ceremony still a main ecermony between so many ritual ceremony (Sekarningsih, 2000).

Mbis statue is a spirit for Asmat society to always thankful for blessing which is gift by The Creator through ancestor spirit. Through engraving the *mbis* statue it seems clear that Asmat society is a community which has never forget the services and struggles o their predecessors. If today happiness and safety their felt, all that can't be separated from the role on the ancestors who have pioneered it since the first. Besides that, the existence *mbis* statue for Asmat society like "glue" which is binding togetherness in living patterned life since the first. Because of that, every detail *mbis* statue engraving is able representing identity of Asmat society in generally, while symbolizing someone personality which represented through carving on the statue. In face part of the statue must made strong lines which symbolizing authority of an Asmat man which is brave and manly. Through statue sculpture, peoples can imagine personality of Asmat people which brave, never give up, and never step back in battle. Every snapshot in part of statue body must able to illustrate knight spirit of Asmat people who struggle in living a life.

Sculpture of statue Asmat society also must representing personality and devotion of the carved person. On one of the *mbis* ceremonial processions or ancestors stump ceremony, a group of Asmat carvers (called *wowipits*) carved statue from person who was died which was made from the trunk. The statue which made must symbolize personality and devotion during lifetime of the carved person. It is a shape of honour and admiration of Asmat society to all the services and devotion during lifetime of the person. On the engraving like this, besides aesthetic value from the statue, the more important is spiritual value. People who see the statue expected not only to be admired by it crave beauty, but which is more emphasized is appreciation of the person personality. Asmat society in particular, expected to emulate the patriotic and knight soul of the person so will always infected and inherited to the next generation in Asmat.

3.3 Jew Traditional House

Like other regions or ethnicities in Indonesia, Asmat tribe has their own traditional house which called *jew*. *Jew* traditional house is a stage building in the form of rectangle. *Jew* traditional house is become a center of various it sacred ritual implementation by local society, for example *mbis* traditional ceremony or ancestors stump statue ceremony. Besides that, *Jew* traditional house become a gathering place or customary stakeholders and the warlords in reconciliation or deliberate solving a problem, doing customary proceedings, and planning various other customary activities.

Jew traditional house is a representation numbers of clan or biggest family group which exist in the Asmat tribe society. The numbers of the clan signed with the numbers of furnace in the traditional house. In the center of the traditional house there is a special fire stove occupied by customary leaders, former warlords, famous engraver from Asmat, as well as a medic or shaman

Although made being shared property all Asmat society member, *jew* traditional house not carelessly entered, especially by the children. A boy has begun to be allowed and accustomed if already youth or aged around twelve years old. It is intended for the children at that age can already recognize, learn, and understand various subtleties of Asmat tribe cultivation. Even, in ancient times before known formal education at school, *jew* traditional house has been place to implementing education for Asmat tribe's children under direct care of indigenous leaders. In it the children are taught about pattern of life and life of Asmat tribe, cultivation of manners, rules, norm, and tradition law which is valid in Asmat, and ethic in treating nature with all the wealth in it.

“Pendidikan di jew, rumah adat itu, mengajarkan keharusan menghormati nenek moyang, bukan maksud menyembah berhala. Hal itu untuk mengingatkan pada setiap orang, bahwa tanpa kehadiran orang-orang tua terdahulu kita tidak mungkin lahir dan ada di bumi. Tanpa endew dan ndiwi, atau ibu dan bapak kita, kau tidak akan lahir di dunia ini. Menikmati keindahan matahari dan mendengar kicau burung, merasakan kebinalan ikan-ikan dalam genggamannya. Kamu tidak dapat mengecap rasa sago bakar yang enak. Bentuk terima kasih itu dinyatakan dengan cara memperingati yang telah meninggal. Mematuhi aturan tabu. Tidak boleh menebang pohon disembarang tempat. Tidak boleh membunuh hewan semaumu. Karena

nenek moyangmu bisa murka. Ia mengazabmu dengan hukumannya, yang langsung diderita penduduk kampung,” demikian Enakap, ayahnya, menasehati Osakat (Sekarningsih, 2002).

“Education in Jew, that tradition house, teaches the necessity of honouring the ancestors, not in purpose to worship the statue. It is to remind to everyone, that without the existence the forerunner we are impossible to birth and exist on earth. Without *endew* (our mother) and *ndiwi* (our father), you will not birth in this world. Enjoying the beauty of sun and listening birds chirping, feel the fishiness in the grasp. You cannot taste the delicious sago roasted taste. The form of gratitude is stated by commemorating the dead. Obey taboo rules. You should not cut down trees in any place. You should not kill animal at will because your ancestors could be angry. He punished you with his punishment, which is suffered by villages directly so that Enakap, His father, advise Osakat (Sekarningsih, 2002).

The main function of *jew* traditional house is is as a place for the implementation of important ceremonies of the Asmat community, examples *mbis* tradition ceremony or ancestors stump statue ceremony. The whole of the *mbis* ceremony procession is held and centered in *jew* traditional house. Start from preparation that is discussion off implementation planning, chanting of the people's song that called *daiso*, distribution of sago packets, engraving process of the *mbis* statue, until set up *mbis* statue, all of it centered in *jew* traditional house.

3.4 Body Decoration

One of characteristic which is very unique from Asmat tribe is decoration which is used by Asmat people to covering their bodies from various activity, even more so on the activities of cultivation. Body accessory which is used by Asmat people not only sticker or unmeaning accessories. Any object or material which is used is containing a deep meaning for Asmat society itself.

Osakat menemukan wajah mantan Panglima Perang Owitipis yang berhias kapur dan tanah merah tergulung di antara asap tebal yang memenuhi seluruh ruang rumah adat. Sekeliling matanya dilingkari jelaga hitam pekat yang menambah keangkerannya. Ia duduk menyendiri, bersandar pada tiang terukir di pusat tungku yang marak membara. Dahinya berdestarkan

facin, yaitu kulit kus-kus berwarna kuning yang penuh dihiasi bulu-bulu putih.

Dadanya yang tipis, padat dihiasi kalung-kalung gigi anjing dan taring babi. Nilai kalung-kalung itu sangat berharga bagi umumnya orang Asmat. Yang menunjukkan wibawa dan kejantanan seseorang. Pada sebatas pinggang kebawah, tertutup awer yang masih baru dilengkapi hiasan bandul-bandul. Awer adalah sejenis rok dari anyaman daun sago. Sedangkan mulut nokennya atau tas anyaman yang bertuah itu, tergantung di lehernya, terbuka menghadap kearah pintu luar. Artinya ia sedang memberi berkat keselamatan bagi seluruh penduduk akmpung. Berharap juga berlangsungnya kemudahan untuk mereka yang bermohon, agar dikabulkan cita-citanya. Di pangkal lengan kirinya terselip pisau berhias. Yakni pisau belati yang terbuat dari tulang kaki burung kasuari (Sekarningsih, 2002).

Osakat found face of ex warlord Owitipis which is decorated with lime and red soil rolled in thick smoke which fulfilled all the room of traditional house. Around his eyes circled bold black soot that adds to his awesomeness. He sitting by himself, leaning on the a carved pole in the centre of a burning furnace, his forehead wearing *facin* headband, that is skin of cuscus colored yellow which full decorated white furs.

His thin chest, densely decorated with dog tooth and pig fangs necklaces. Value of those necklaces is very valuable for Asmat people generally. Which is indicates one's authority and virility. On the waist down, covered by *awer* which is still new equipped with pendulums decoration. *Awer* is a kind of skirt from woven sago leaves. While the mouth of the *noken* or webbing bag which has magic power, hanging on his neck, open facing out door. It means he is giving a blessing of salvation for all the villagers. Also hope the ease for those who have begged, to be granted of their future goals. At the base of his left arm tucked in n ornate knife. That is dagger knives made from Cassowary bird's leg bones (Sekarningsih, 2002).

If noticed, the jewellery which is used by the Warlords of Asmat tribe all material or object which is resourced from nature. None of the material or object which is used are modern and from synthetic material with high technology. This is a symbol of Asmat people unification with nature and around environment. Their love to nature and environment are realized by various accessories which merged with their body. By decorating their body using

natural material, Asmat people want to convey the message that Asmat people can't be separated from whole nature. Nature is a part of live and their life.

4 DUSCUSSION

Carving art for Asmat society is a form harmony of life the society with around nature, also as an embodiment of Asmat society spiritual to the ancestor. Besides as an aesthetic expression, carving art for Asmat society is a form of life harmony of the society with around nature. The result of carving especially engraving of statue is an embodiment of Asmat society spiritual to the ancestors. That is why, in one side sculpture for Asmat society become expression of thankful to God which has blessing nature and environment which able to give life for local society. In other side, sculpture becomes symbol of belief to existence of the ancestors which has protected and give bless. In the point of view of Rumansara et al. (2014), the Asmat carving is a carving of belief that aims to worship the spirits of the ancestors so that carving is a human activity in the form of the birth of a personal state into an ideological, psychological, physiological, and religious state.

Although carving skills have become the nature of the Asmat tribe community, they believe that not all Asmat people get the expertise and ability to carve *mbis* statues, only chosen people can carve them (Hutabarat, et al., 2019). If other carving art can be done anytime and anywhere, carving *mbis* statues must be done through a procession of sacred traditional ceremonies namely *mbis pokmbu*. The result of study conducted by Didipu (2019) indicates that the *mbis pokmbu* traditional ceremony has three important roles for the Asmat community, namely (1) as an expression of admiration of the Asmat people to their ancestors, (2) a form of gratitude to the creator of the universe, and (3) a ritual of praying a blessing. Ancestors stump statue or *mbis* containing high aesthetic value, while containing spiritual value because believed to be a place of reside of the spirits of the ancestors. With the existence of this *mbis* statue, local society believe that the ancestors spirit who was died always close to them in daily life. The result of study conducted by Asmarandani (2007) show that *mbis* statues are the efforts of Asmat tribe to maintain their relationship with people who have died. These ancestors spirit which is believed give bless and protecting to them. Because of that, the more statues

made, the more the ancestors spirit which exist close to them so bless and protecting much more too.

Jew traditional house has important meaning for the Asmat tribe community. Apart from being a place to live, *jew* become the center of the activities of the worship. The *jew* traditional house is a house intended for the implementation of traditional activities, ceremonies, traditional meetings, *noken* (traditional asmat bags) making, wood carving (Prasetya and Edhi 2013). *Jew* traditional house is a symbol of togetherness and unity, and also containing sacred value as a centre of cultivation. It is means that Asmat peoples are one unified whole. Whenever and wherever Asmat people are, they are bound by one pattern of same cultivation system. Clan or biggest family group can be different, but when they are in the traditional house, all blend into one unified whole.

Body decoration for Asmat society Papua is a symbol of unity with nature and environment. If noticed carefully, almost every single body decoration which is used by Asmat people is a material that resourced from nature. It is a tangible manifestation of unity of Asmat people with whole nature. By looking at the ever-worn body ornaments, hinted to the world that Asmat people can't be separated from nature and environment. Nature is a life for Asmat people. Nature is God's greatest gift to Asmat tribe community.

In general, cultural artefacts have sacred values for Asmat tribe community due to their five main functions, namely spiritual, ecological, aesthetical, social, and economical functions. Spiritual function, related to local society system of belief which is believe the existence of ancestor spirits which reside in the cultural objects like statue. Ecology function, related with the existence of nature and environment which is becomes resource of life and centre all the cultural activities as a God's grace. Aesthetic function, related with expression of art and channelling talent of Asmat people who believed that he born as a carver. Social function, related with unity and commonality of mind pattern every Asmat people so it become like "glue" which binding them in one whole unity group. Economical function is related to the economic potential resulting from handicraft art of the Asmat tribe community that can be sold at high prices so that it has the potential to improve the welfare of local communities.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the result off the research and discussion above, can be summed up things as follows. There are four kind of cultural artifacts of Asmat tribe Papua which represented in the novels by Ani Sekarningsih, there are Art of carving, ancestors stump statue or *mbis*, *Jew* traditional house, and body decoration. Each of those artifacts has meaning and value of it sacred for local society. First, Art off carving for Asmat society is a form of the society harmony of life with surround nature. Besides that result of carving is a spiritual embodiment the Asmat society to the ancestors. Second, ancestors stump statue or *mbis* containing high aesthetic value, also containing spiritual value because believed as a place where the ancestor spirits reside. Third, *Jew* traditional house is a symbol of togetherness and unity, and also containing value of it sacred as a centre of cultivation. Fourth, body decoration for Asmat tribe society is a symbol of unification of self with nature and around environment. The sacred value of cultural artefacts for the Asmat tribe community essentially departs from five main functions, namely the spiritual function, ecological function, aesthetic function, social function, and economic function.

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