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Cultural Misrepresentations of the COVID-19 Response in Indonesia

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Abstract.
The cultural aspects of Indonesian society have been overlooked by government policies aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. The Government has tended to overlook Indonesian society's visible and intimate culture, whether on a daily basis or in the face of unforeseen events such as crises. The data for this study were gathered by tracking COVID-19-related news on the internet, narrative and message content on social media, and television broadcasts. The absence, as well as the neglect, of local wisdom and local perspectives in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia were mapped using primary data and critical analysis. The findings revealed that cultural misrepresentations in the handling of COVID-19 manifested themselves in a variety of ways, including the Government's sole authority, the use of foreign languages, instructional messages, and community traditions. The neglect of culture has aided the virus's spread, and society's response has been indifferent, if not chaotic. This paper argues that if the lack of culture in the handling of COVID-19 is allowed to continue, the government-society relationship will become more distant, not only in terms of social but also cultural distancing.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, media online, media social, social distancing, cultural distancing

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1. Introduction

Preventing the spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia has experienced many failures, one of which is due to the absence of cultural aspects in handling Covid-19. Report from the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19 as of September 28, Covid-19 patients reached 278,722 and 10,473 deaths (GTPP Covid 19). Kompas even released news for three days in a row, on September 14-17, stated that there were about 110 deaths due to coronavirus per day, with an increase of 18.9% until September 20, 2020. Health experts, especially epidemiologists, are also concerned about the increasing number of deaths and exposed patients in almost all regions of Indonesia by recommending a PSBB or lockdown (CNN Team, 2020). This condition has made several regions reintroduce distance limitation policies and daily activities, such as Jakarta

(Team Kompas, 2020), Bogor, Tanggerang (Team Liputan6, 2020). The increasing number of covid-19 exposure is due to the sporadic handling of covid-19 [1], [2], [3], lack of coordination between central and local governments [3], insubordination shown by society [4]. Meanwhile, an outbreak or crisis requires more comprehensive handling by involving all elements together [5][5], [6], including cultural aspects. The handling of epidemics and crises that have been ongoing tends to ignore the past history that has hit the world and even Indonesia itself. Indonesian people who are accustomed to natural risks, such as people who live in the area of Mount Merapi, have social and cultural mechanisms in dealing with the threat of volcanic eruptions. [7]. As Lavigne mentioned, three factors influence people's behavior in responding to natural hazards, for instance, basic knowledge regarding disasters, personal experience in dealing with crises, and the historical momentum of the last disaster. [8]. Past tragedies, as mentioned in the Al-Qur'an such as *ta'un* tragedy ([9], [10] or the tragedy of black death in Europe [11], [12] should be a lesson to learn and we need to take a wise attitude in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, as in the past human tragedy.

Moreover, studies on the failure to handle the crisis/outbreak, in this case, the Covid-19 pandemic, tend to investigate the aspect of handling procedural errors [13], [14]; studies that investigate the apathy /indifference aspects of society [4]; and the slow or poor coordination of the government in making decisions to handle the spread of Covid-19 [3]. Meanwhile, studies that look at the failure of handling the outbreak in the aspect of cultural absence have not been widely studied. The cultural aspect is important to include considering that Indonesia consists of various ethnic groups who have cultural mechanisms in the history of handling crises in their lives. The introduction of cultural aspects is urgent in preventing the spread of the virus that is increasingly widespread [15]. If cultural aspects are still neglected in handling Covid-19, it will create a widening distance between the government and society, both in the form of social distancing, and even worse in cultural distancing.

Based on this argument, this study is aimed to carefully examine the absence (misrepresentation) of culture in preventing the spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia. This research specifically analyzed the forms of cultural misrepresentation in question and how they impact the spread of Covid-19. Cultural aspects are important to include in handling the spread of Covid-19, considering that preventing the spread of the virus that is increasingly widespread requires the involvement of cultural aspects [16], [17]. In overcoming a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, humans should always be able to learn from past historical mistakes, as Mian reminded that HIV was considered only a rumor and conspiracy at that time. [18]. Tracing the neglected cultural aspects will be very

useful; therefore they can be used as lessons (wisdom) as a pre-condition for society in overcoming crisis problems in the future.

This paper is based on the argument that the neglect of cultural aspects of Indonesian society has led to an increase in the number of spread and death due to Covid-19 during the last 6 months, starting during the pandemic (early March 2020), until the new normal period (September 2020). The neglect of cultural aspects can be identified from the use of unfamiliar and alternate language and terms (foreign languages), restrictions on access to information from the general public, and the inaccessibility of people's cultural needs and mechanisms in handling covid-19. These three forms of misrepresentation have an impact on apathy/ indifference to society, insubordination, and blind anger. Knowledge of forms of cultural misrepresentation in handling covid-19 and the impact of religious socio-culture they cause is very important to identify deficiencies in handling covid-19 in cultural aspects. This will be very useful in handling the crisis/epidemic which accommodates cultural mechanisms that are more relevant and in line with the needs of the community. Crisis management is culturally able to attract more active and accommodating community participation and sensitivity [6], [19], [20] in overcoming the epidemic crisis. In this way, the handling of Covid-19 takes place comprehensively, because it does not only involve the government but also all the smallest elements of society. In this way, control of the spread will be easier to do and the performance of the government will be indirectly assisted and lightened.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Neglected aspects of culture

The presence of the Coronavirus in early March 2020 shocked everyone and almost all parties and institutions were not ready for this sudden condition, including the Indonesian government. This unpreparedness causes decisions and policies to be taken to be single authoritative, less controlled, lack coordination between one institution and another, even between the central and local governments. [2], [3], [21], [13], [22], [23].

The decisions and policies of the central government have led to the neglect of the socio-cultural conditions of Indonesian society (Adom, 2020). The culture referred to in this paper is "customary beliefs and values inherited by ethnic, religious, and social groups which are permanent and passed down from generation to generation" [24]. Cultural misrepresentation in this case is interpreted as the absence or neglect of belief, the values of Indonesian society that have been passed down from generation

to generation in handling the spread of the coronavirus by the Indonesian government. Moreover, in delivering information to prevent this virus from spreading further, the central government tends to forget the cultural capital of the Indonesian people who have local intelligence and genius in overcoming the crisis. [25].

Indonesian society is different from a western society where the culture of Indonesian society is the culture of the association (Gemeinschaft), a community that is friendly and usually gathers or is a communal society. [26], [27], not the *patembayan* society (Gesellschaft) which focuses more on individual needs rather than communal and social. He is also characterized by not prioritizing physical closeness as a bridge of emotional closeness. Community associations as well as Indonesian society need physical closeness, especially during times of crisis, where these communal communities are accustomed to turning their heads and looking for physical and emotional support from others. [28], [29]. How can this frightening crisis condition make the communal community have to overcome themselves behind fences and walls, not only physically, but also socially.

The culture of Indonesian society with this communal characteristic is not taken into account in handling Covid-19, hence, the handling of Covid becomes centralized and uniform, ignoring the varied cultures in several regions of Indonesia. As a result, when the social and physical distancing policies were echoed, people panicked and lost their way [30], [31]. Not to mention the problem of the tagline of worshiping from home, making Muslims seem disturbed by their belief and faith, hence, some still carry out Friday prayers at mosques during the pandemic, even Eid is still celebrated in mosques, including family visits that are still ongoing as usual (BBS News Indonesia, 2020).

2.2. The importance of including culture in times of pandemic crisis

If we reflect on the socialization of health protocols in several countries, government policies are able to involve the entire community by empowering the potential and strength of the locality which is the trust of the people of that country. In India, for instance, the socialization of the dangers of the Coronavirus is carried out by using the symbol of a local Indian figure, symbols that are better known to the Indian community, even simultaneously supported by the community. [32], [33]. Likewise with Ghana, where the president declared a recommendation to pray to God as well as advice for all religious groups to jointly fight the corona outbreak. [34]. The model for handling the spread of the virus in Indonesia seems to distance the Indonesian people from cultural power as well as the historical power possessed by the Indonesian people. During the pandemic,

people were kept apart, not only physically, but also socially and even more culturally. As affirmed by Bergman, social distancing policy still requires social connectedness [35]. Social distancing policies may be socialized by the government, but these policies can use the power of locality to involve the community actively, proactively, and massively. In several parts of Indonesia, the strength of locality has become a local intelligence that is empowered by the community to prevent the outbreak from becoming more widespread (Semedi, 2020; Laksono, 2020).

The cultural aspect admitted by some experts is often neglected in handling the spread of covid-19, as explained by Wildman that religious ideology and cultural values are not taken into account in stopping the spread of the epidemic. [36]. Meanwhile, the crisis and how to overcome the crisis have a close relationship with the values that are believed to be true by the community. People will tend to follow a policy, if it is delivered properly and close to the socio-cultural context of the community. People's knowledge and attitudes in understanding Covid-19 are part of their culture (Coyle & Holt, 2020), therefore the delivery of information and handling it also actually accommodates cultural values. Neglecting cultural aspects in handling covid-19 as reminded by Wildman (2020) has historically had a very fatal impact, as exemplified in the refusal of healing in cases of the HIV/AIDS virus medically (Adom, 2020). People who are not disciplined, ignore health protocols, and even oppose and disobey government policies in Covid-19 are also happened because they are considered to be contrary to the values and beliefs of the culture as well as religion they believe. This leads the efforts to localize and stop the spread of the virus to fail because it ignores the cultural and religious values of the community [37].

The involvement of cultural aspects of Indonesian society will be very useful in reducing the spread of Covid-19 increasingly widespread. The presence of culture will also ease the burden on medical personnel to concentrate on treating their illness amidst limited facilities, a limited number of medical personnel, and limited medical devices/equipment. Culture will be able to underline strategic efforts that can be made related to the identification of perspectives and mindsets and patterns of life of the Indonesian people that cannot be separated from values and beliefs based on locality and religion [15], [38].

In addition, the involvement of local figures, such as community leaders, traditional leaders, and religious leaders, will become figures for transmitting information from the government with a personal, emotional, and cultural approach. [39]. The involvement of cultural aspects will also be able to reduce the bad effects of confusing information on social media and online media about this pandemic. Uskul (2020) affirms that it is

nearly impossible to combat myths and misinformation related to COVID-19 by leaving cultural knowledge behind [40].

Fighting the coronavirus is not only the responsibility of the government but also the responsibility of the community. Therefore, it is important to involve the community in stopping the wider spread. However, the community will feel called to be involved in the approach used is an approach that is appropriate and close to their conditions. Stopping the spread of the virus is a humanitarian project that requires collective coordination so that it can go a long way in helping local authorities implement policies effectively [33].

3. Method

The primary data in this study were online news, TV broadcasts, and information on various social media about the Indonesian government's policies in overcoming COVID-19. This online news was collected through keyword searches on the title and content of news related to government policy issues in dealing with the spread of the virus. The news search was compiled from news from March-September 2020 when the first Covid patients were announced by the president and until Indonesia entered the new normal era in September, which was marked by an increase in positive patients and an increase in the death rate due to this outbreak. The data was selected and sorted to be categorized according to aspects of cultural absence in the handling of COVID-19 by the government.

These primary data were classified to find evidence of cultural neglect in handling the spread of Covid-19 in more detailed aspects. The data categorization was then analyzed using critical analysis to map the absence and even neglect of local wisdom and local genius in preventing the spread of the coronavirus by the Indonesian government.

4. Result and Discussion

During the pandemic, handling the spread of Covid-19 has tended to ignore the various cultural aspects of Indonesian society. Cultural misrepresentations indicate the absence of cultural aspects of the local community, whether activities, figures, or cultural forms in the socialization of handling covid-19. Cultural neglect in the way the government handles Covid-19 can be described in several ways, such as the sole authority of the government, the use of foreign languages, instructive messages, and neglected community traditions.

4.1. The sole authority of government

The government is the only party that has the most authority and power to provide any information related to Covid-19, starting from the number of patients who have recovered and died, the area of distribution, and determining the status of a certain area based on the numbers and predictions of its growth. The Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19 which was formed by the central government and continued by the task force of each province to the smaller sector shows authoritative government authority [3], [41]. The data on the increase in patients may have already occurred in the community, it may be that the numbers exceed the normative figures issued by the government, but it is the government represented by the Task Force who has the right to decide on these figures.

Not only authoritative, but the government's position as the only source of knowledge on Covid-19 also shows different policies between one ministry and another, between the central and regional governments. [42], also the controversy over the inter-ministerial statements [43]. Non-uniformity and even policy conflicts have occurred between the minister of health and the minister of transportation regarding online motorcycle taxis when DKI was implementing PSBB (large-scale social restrictions) [44], this is the case with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Village, Development of Disadvantaged Regions And Transmigration, and the Ministry of Social Affairs [45]. The decisions of the central and local governments also cause things that are very out of sync and confuse the Indonesian society, as happened in DKI Jakarta[46]. Likewise, the prohibition of gathering in one particular place is not treated the same as another. For example, the prohibition to pray in congregation at mosques, but at the same time, the prohibition does not apply to markets, malls, and other public places. This has prompted questions and criticism from the MUI [47]. Not to mention that the problem of social restrictions taken by the regional government has caused various problems because President Jokowi gave an ultimatum that social imprisonment is the central authority. [48], this is acknowledged by the Ministry of Internal Affairs itself [49]. Contradictory incidents in several regions have caused problems as happened in Papua [4]. Various parties see the problem of chaotic policies between ministries and between the center and the regions are very confusing for the community. In this case, the DPR needs to strengthen its function as people's representatives in supervising the government and working together to take pro-people policies and do not overlap. [50]. The government should provide clear

information and one command so that the public does not suspect it as a politically laden policy [51].

4.2. Use of foreign languages/terms

The Coronavirus had led the world in panic and caused fear in the community. This fear and panic are further strengthened by information through language media which is also confusing, for example, the tendency to use language and terms that are not familiar to the Indonesian society, especially the common people. [52]. Foreign terms related to viruses tend to be in favor of the well-off and educated people. The terms involve *pandemic, lockdown, social distancing, physical distancing, work from home, work from office, self-quarantine, new normal* [53]. Public confusion not only physically but also mentally/psychologically is increasing because the government uses unfamiliar language in a crisis. This fact confirms the government's impartiality for common people [54]. The confusion has prompted observers to express calls for the government to use more terms that are easier for the public to understand [55].

Currently, the public studied and adapted to foreign for example the term *propable, suspect, confirmed case, discarded* [56], [57], [58]. The old terms were not fully understood and even traumatized, the government suddenly replaced them with terms that were equally foreign and caused new confusion. [59], [60].

Even if the government uses Indonesian, it tends to be refined, but it still creates confusing meanings. The recommendation issued by the government to get used to a new life does not provide a solution for the survival of the community, especially in the economic aspect. Sentences issued by the President to live in peace with Covid [61], [62], a new habitual adaptation term to replace *the new normal* term that was previously introduced [63], likewise with the appeal to "stay at home" with various kinds of hashtags informing social media and news media. Living at home is problematic for the lower class community, which requires them to go out to earn a living for the basic needs of their family [64].

The absence of the Indonesian language in handling the epidemic crisis is a challenge in the Indonesian Dictionary. Linguists have to work hard to update the words in Indonesian, not only the words but also their meanings [65], including analyzing the emergence of new words or terms [66].

4.3. Instructive message

The way the government socializes the policy of physical distance, lockdown, staying at home tends to use instructive messages. The approach taken is a patrolistic approach, not a persuasive approach. The Police of the Republic of Indonesia tends to use a punitive greeting model, such as the Chief of Police's declaration to dissolve the mass gathering and presidential instructions to take firm action for violators. [67] [68]. Punishment is given to residents who do not wear masks as happened in Surabaya (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCC3AAZrFvo). Most of the patrols are carried out by the police and local governments in the form of inspections, issuing suspicions, etc.

Punishment or other forms of sanctions are government efforts to prevent the virus from spreading. Threatening appeals were also made for those who were still disobedient. There are also many threatening posters on the front page of websites or government agencies or their representatives. This was also driven by the indiscipline of citizens on previous appeals so that the government took tougher action. To bring society closer to government policies, Indonesia needs to learn from other countries in engaging the community directly, as in India which uses traditional Indian figures and symbols. [32], [33], including what happened in Ghana [34], so that the socialization of the prevention of Covid 19 takes place effectively because the community feels part of this effort.

4.4. Community Traditions Are Ignored

Indonesian society, which is a community, with a tendency to bond, both physically and emotionally, has disappeared during a pandemic. This has led to protests from residents when there was a presidential instruction not to go home [69], [70], [71] thus resulting in coercion by residents even by tricking officers just before Eid [72], [73]. The social and physical distancing policy extends such a great distance, even during a crisis period when a person needs support from their closest relative, family, friends, and loved ones.

Indonesians are a typical communal society who need emotional support, especially in times of crisis [28], [29].

A more severe fact is the handling of the covid-19 body, where the body is immediately buried without going through the procedure for handling the body as in Muslim society and other religions, even family members are not allowed to approach the body. A contradicting condition between the efforts made by medical personnel based on preventing the risk of spreading with families who feel that their religious beliefs and respect for family members are as if neglected. Incidents of confiscation of bodies, against the medical and even brought mass to occur in several regions in Indonesia [74]–[77] related to the handling of the covid body which was authoritatively carried out by medical officers. There is no room for dialogue and solving problems that are solutive between the family and medical personnel. In a crisis, space for religion and culture seems closed in overcoming the crisis [36]. Meanwhile, in a condition of grieving, a person and family need support from people who are close and trusted [35], not more distant.

The government has indeed repeatedly appealed to the public to participate in preventing the outbreak from spreading, but ignores aspects of the culture and habits of the Indonesian people, while these aspects of culture have proven successful in overcoming crises that have experienced in Indonesia in the past. [14]. Meanwhile, Uskul emphasized that the virus could not be contained if its handling neglected cultural knowledge [40].

Exploring the neglected cultural aspects will be very useful; hence, they can be used as lessons (wisdom) as a pre-condition for society in overcoming crisis problems in the future. Several regions in Indonesia have started to implement this; even academics are doing various things by reaffirming local genius to invite the active involvement of the community in reducing this outbreak, as was done by Laura Sirep Pagebluk who has succeeded in collecting Rengeng-rengeng Maskumambang from various cultures in Indonesia. Indonesia [78]. The way people deal with the crisis is inseparable from their values, beliefs, and religious and cultural beliefs [38]. This includes the involvement of local leaders [79]. Covid-19 prevention is too frightening and alienates people from the social aspect and more so from their cultural aspects. The authority that transmits messages, the language used, the way of delivery, and the absence of cultural mechanisms in handling Covid 19 have made social distancing increasingly stretched between the community and the government, resulting in rejection, resistance, and defiance by people in various regions in Indonesia related to recommended health protocols by the government.

5. Conclusion

This study is based on tracing online news and social media content and TV broadcasts related to Indonesian government policies in overcoming COVID-19. This study intends to fill in the gaps in the analysis of the absence of culture as the government's failure to tackle an epidemic that has not been widely studied. The findings of this study underline that the cultural capital possessed by Indonesia is an aspect that cannot be ignored, considering that Indonesia in some of its life histories has been able to face and overcome crises because of using cultural problem-solving mechanisms. The involvement of cultural mechanisms will be able to generate active community involvement because people feel that they are part of the government's attention and part of helping their own lives. However, this study requires further study considering that this study only focuses on news through online media and social media as well as TV broadcasts which require more data. Further studies are urgently needed on the aspect of factual cultural absence in society through strengthening interviews, direct observation in order to obtain a more complete picture of the conditions for handling Covid-19 from a cultural perspective as well as being a pre-condition for crises in the future.

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