

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Lepet: Cultural Significance of Indonesian Glutinous Rice Snack in Different Area

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Abstract:

Lepet is a traditional snack made of rice or glutinous rice that covered with coconut or banana leaves and processed through boiling or steaming for a few hours. Nowadays, lepet is just sold as a snack but still had significant value in Indonesian society and used in many ceremonies and festivals. Most of the ceremonies are held in Java's island, such as seserahan melek and bersih desa, which use lepet as offerings. Aside from lepet, there are another similar food with similar name, such as leupeut in West Java, lepat bugi in Sumatera, and lapa-lapa in Sulawesi. From historical view, lepet is receiving an influence of immigration and religions along Indonesian history.

Keywords: glutinous rice, Javanese, lepet, Sundanese

1. Introduction

Rice is one of the most important food for human consumption. It becomes a staple food in populated countries of Asia such as China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Luh, 1999). Most of the daily caloric intake of people in Asiatic countries come from rice (Rohman et al., 2014). Based on the amylose content, there are two types of rice, which is glutinous and non-glutinous rice. Glutinous rice has cloudy appearance, high amylopectin content, and soft texture (Lian et al., 2014). It also absorbs a little amount of water, so it is usually steamed (Esterik, 2008). Glutinous rice is consumed as a dietary staple food from Shan areas of Northern Burma to North and Northeastern of Thailand, Laos and the mountain areas in Vietnam. Countries in East and Southeast Asia also use a small amount of glutinous rice for sweets, snacks, and desserts, and usually for festive occasions (Barker et al., 1985). Luh (1999) also said that some Asian snack foods are required to use glutinous rice other than non-glutinous rice. The stickiness, porous, and good expandability make glutinous rice preferred than non-glutinous rice. There are a lot of snack foods made from glutinous rice cakes in Asia. In Japan, there are rice cracker, rice cakes, *chimaki*, and *mochi*. China also has rice cakes and other snack foods such *asyuan-zi*, *lu dou gao*, *zong zi*, *rou zong*, *neng gao* and *tiang jiu niang*. In Taiwan, there are rice cakes and fermented rice cakes or *fakau*, while in Phillipines there is a fermented rice cakes or *bibingka* (Banaay, et al. 2013).

Indonesia, which is known as a very diverse nation, also has many traditional snacks made from glutinous rice. Most of the traditional snacks are specified into a certain area, such as tape ketan (Siebenhandl et al, 2001), lemang (Wahyudi et al, 2017), brem from Bali (Aryanta, 2000), and klepon from Central Java (Adriyati & Wiwaha, 2016). Differs from some traditional snacks, *lepet* has been widely used and can be seen in many parts of Indonesia, such as Java, Sumatera, Bangka, Bali, or even other parts of Indonesia. *Lepet* is an Indonesian snack that made of glutinous rice wrapped in coconut or banana leaves (Ernawati, 2014). Despite the popularity, most of the research only focused on how and why a tradition works. On the other hand, recently, there is no research discussing the history, usage, and cultural value of *lepet* in many traditions. This paper may be the first research that serves a comprehensive review solely about *lepet*. Therefore, this study is conducted to explain similarities and differences of *lepet* values in the different area across Indonesia.

2. Method

A qualitative research was applied in this study. The data will be obtained from primary and secondary source. Primary source will be obtained from interview by using in-depth interview with some scholars that profound in history of *lepet*. Secondary source will be obtained from literature. The result of the interview will be analyzed and compared with available literature.

3. Making of *Lepet*

The main ingredients of *lepet* are rice or glutinous rice, red beans, shredded coconut, and salt. Coconut or banana leaves are used as cover or packaging material. First, rice or glutinous rice and red beans are soaked overnight in water to soften the texture. The ratio of rice and red beans are 3:1. All of the ingredients are mixed uniformly in a big bowl, then take two or three spoons of it and put on the banana leaves, wrap, make a pair, and tie it together. After that, the *lepet* will be boiled. Traditionally, *lepet* is boiled for 3 hours. On the other hand, many people prefer to boil *lepet* using a pressure cooker for more efficient cooking time. Using a pressure cooker, *lepet* will be boiled for 30 until 45 minutes. The general process of making *lepet* is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

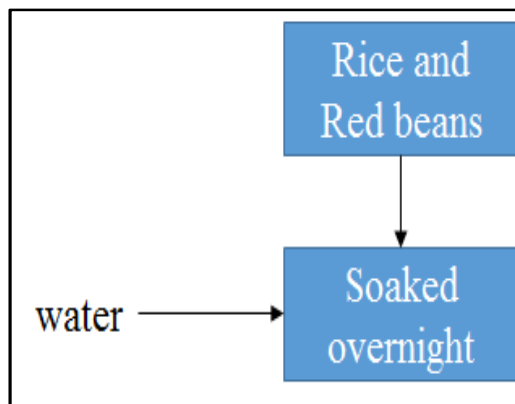


Figure 1: Preparation of rice and red beans

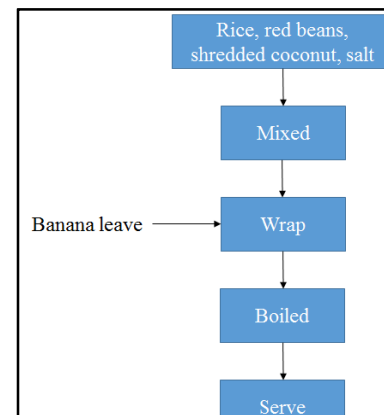


Figure 2: Process of making *lepet*

In Bangka, the method of making *lepet* is slightly different. To soften the texture, the rice is par-boiled instead of soaked in water for several hours. Glutinous rice traditionally par-boiled in a wok called *luser* using wood-burning stove called *tungke*. Mixture of par-boiled rice, coconut, and salt then wrapped with coconut leaves known as *janur*. Wrapped *lepet* then boiled using *kincing* or traditional rice cooker (Rasyid, 2004).

4. *Lepet* in Javanese Perspective

Native Java's culture has two beliefs, which is animism and dynamism (Purwadi, 2013). Animism believes in ancestral spirits, while dynamism believes in ancient stuff with supernatural powers. In addition, history also shows that there were many kingdoms in Java, whose brought many influences and doctrines to the people. In general, there are two types of a kingdom in Indonesia, which is Hindu-Buddha's and Moslem's (Muljana, 2005). These beliefs and doctrines lead to many mystical traditions or rituals in Java. Most of the rituals prepare some offerings for the ancestral spirits, gods, and goddesses, to ask for a good luck, wealth, health, or to eliminate curse and disease. For example, a ritual called *Bersih Desa* which is held by Java's people. Rice is not easy to grow in some regions of Southeast Asia. They believe in Dewi Sri, a goddess that determine the yield of rice (Esterik, 2008). To ask Dewi Sri for an abundant yield, safe, and well-organized life, this ritual offer some foods and snacks (such as coconut, rice, chicken egg, sweet *rujak*, and *ketupat*), which *lepet* is one of them (Widayat, 2004). Another literature also said that by offering the *Danjang Desa* ("guardian spirit of the village"), the village can be cleansed from dangerous spirits. In strong *santri* village, this ritual is held in mosque, which consists of Moslem prayers (Geertz, 1976).

Another ritual called *Sedekah Laut* is held once a year in Ujungbatu Village, Jepara. The purpose of *Sedekah Laut* is to thank God for abundant fish stocks and to eliminate diseases (Astono, 2006). This ritual is divided into two phases, which is preparation phase (6 *syawal*) and peak phase (7 *syawal*). Preparation phase lasts for two days and consists of seven processes, which is *sedekah laut*, parade (*arak-arakan*) for bringing a cow to a slaughterhouse, slaughtering the cow, making offerings with cow head, *selamatan*, *ziarah* to Cik Lanan's and Kyai Ronggomulyo's tomb, and ended with *wayang* performance for all night long. On the other hand, peak phase consists of five processes, which is a ceremony of offerings releasing to the ocean, *pelarungan sesaji*, *Lomban* party, *wayang* performance, and *Rakyat* party. *Lepet* is used in *Lomban* party and *Rakyat* party (Indrahti, 2017). In *Lomban* party occurring '*perang teluk*', which using *kupat* and *lepet* as bullet. Otherwise, *kupat* and *lepet* fought over by people at the end of the *Rakyat* party. Both *kupat* and *lepet* are arranged in form of food mountain, which the amount is adjusted with the year of the event being held. Since 2006, there is an extra event in this ritual called *kupat lepet* festival (Alamsyah, 2013). *Kupat* and *lepet* are common foods that served during *Syawalan* tradition. For some regions that do not have the tradition, *kupat* along with *opor ayam* always served on 1 *Syawal* date. On the other hand, regions with *Syawalan*

tradition, such as Jepara, Demak, and Solo, *kupat* and *lepet* always served on 8 *Syawal* date. Both *kupat* and *lepet* are shared to each other to symbolize generosity and forgiveness.

In addition, there was a research conducted to study a wedding tradition called *Kemanten Jadur* in Kabupaten Lumpur, East Java (Qudus, 2013). This tradition has a unique cultural value, which differs from other common wedding traditions in Lumpur district. *Kemanten Jadur* has been conducted since 1600, more precisely in the era of Giri Kedaton's Kingdom. It was ruled by Mbah Sindujoyo, an influential Moslem figure. At that time, most of the people were already strongly influenced by animism, dynamism, and Hindhu-Buddha's doctrine (Wildan, 2015). Before Mbah Sindujoyo arrived at Kabupaten Lumpur, the people had done a wedding tradition called *Kemanten Tu' Nong*. Despite the difficulties, Mbah Sindujoyo was still spreading Moslem's doctrine effectively by making art medias and wedding rituals. *Kemanten Jadur* wedding ritual has three phases, which is *sungkem*, *arak-arakan*, and *temu kemanten*. *Lepet* is used at the *temu kemanten*, for specific at the process of *seserahan meleki*. This process is about some snacks prepared by the bride's family which covered with a piece of cloth. *Lepet* is one of the snack that required in *seserahan meleki*.

5. *Lepet* in Sundanese Perspective

Sundanese is second largest Indonesian ethnic that resides in Western Java area. Sundanese speaks their own language on the daily basis and becomes an advocate of their culture, even in another area where they live in, such as Central Java and Lampung (Rustiadi & Mirzanti, 2015). *Lepet* or known as *leupeut* also has significant value in Sunda society. Different from *lepet* in Central or Eastern Java, *leupeut* served in pair and often covered with banana leaves instead of coconut leaves (*janur*). *Leupeut* also not tied circularly like *lepet*, but only in each side of it, known as "*sehangkot*" or translated as in pair. Sundanese traditionally used *leupeut* as food while traveling because of its practical and pretty long shelf life. Well-made *leupeut* can be consumed for two days without any treatments such as re-heating or chilling. *Leupeut* also used in several ceremonies, part of festivals, and a snack for the family gathering. Nowadays Sundanese considers *leupeut* as a common snack that can be found in many places such as traditional market or local snack shop.

The origin of *leupeut* can be traced back with the belief of Dewi Sri. Dewi Sri or known as Nyi Pohaci by Sundanese is a goddess or spirit of fertility and associated with rice in traditional beliefs. Traditional Sundanese is an agricultural centered ethnic group with rice as the main commodity. Several ceremonies still held by numbers of Sundanese including performing musical instruments such as *angklung* and dancing to awake Dewi Sri and ask for her cooperation to ensure the success of crop planted (Spiller, 2010).

Leupeut is used as one of the offering to Dewi Sri along with another food, drinks, and incense in various ceremonies. One example is *hajat solokan* an agricultural ceremony held every 3,5 years a day after cleaning of irrigation in Rancakalong District, Sumedang, West Java. *Hajat solokan* ceremony begin with preparation of offerings such as goat, rooster, banana tree, *jawerkotok* leaves, pacing tree, white cloth, and another side offerings. The ceremony continued by burning *kemenyan* incense and lighting cigarette offering, reciting mantras and Moslem's prayer, sacrificing animals offering, and distributing food offerings to participants. The ceremony showed an influence of Hinduism by holding a ceremony and praying to the east direction not toward the *qiblah* (mecca direction) as normally Moslems do (Setyobudi, 2011). Other festivals that use *lepet* as offerings or necessities are *Hajat Waliat* ceremony for welcoming Eid al-Fitr, *Mitembeyan* ceremony that held a night before planting paddy fields, *Netepkeun* ceremony that held three or seven days after rice harvested and entered a silo, and in celebration of Indonesia's Independence Day in some area in West Java (Herayati, et.al., 1993).

Traditional Indonesian culture, including Sundanese, views traditional offerings or food into two categories, which is masculinity known as *lingga* and femininity known as *yonis* (Wawan, 2015). This principle is similar with Chinese view on yin and yang. *Leupeut* itself viewed as a symbol of *yonis* by Sundanese. This perspective made some idioms that associated *leupeut* with eroticism. Example of such idiom is when a female wear tight clothes and therefore she will be said as *leupeut*-like (Muhtadin, 2017). There are also different saying about symbolism for *leupeut* in Javanese perspective that it is actually representing *lingga* or masculinity. That can be viewed by relation of *kupat* (similar food that made by rice covered in coconut leaves) and *lepet*. *Kupat* always be cut before consumed and never opened by ripping off the coconut leaves cover. This symbolizes that *lepet* (masculinity) penetrating into *kupat* (femininity) and cut it out (Suwardi, 2009). There also similar saying in Sundanese culture itself that *leupeut* is representing masculinity in occasions such as *mantun*. *Mantun* itself is a show of reciting traditional poems known as *pantun*. Before *Mantun* show is held several offerings must be prepared including *kemenyan* incense, some foods including *leupeut*, and makeup necessities for female goddess. *Mantun* can be divided into three parts which is *raja pamuka*, *mangkat carita*, and *raja pamunah*. *Pantun* in Sundanese tradition is presenting wide variety of stories ranging from hero tales to spirituality tales. *Pantun* ended by *raja pamunah* contains mantra and prayers to celestial beings such as *pohaci* and also added by Islamic god, prophet, and heroes after Islamic period (Yusandi, 2010). Afterall, according to Sundanese folk belief such as "*Aliran Kebatinan Perjalanan*" *leupeut* symbolize that everything must come in a pair such as man-woman and higher-lower. Difference made harmonization is needed to fulfill balance, unity, and kinship between human beings (Suhanah, 2014).

6. *Lepet* in Another Perspective

Lepet also found in Bangka island, known as *lepet bangka*. It takes place as traditional snack toward Malayan Bangkanese people. *Lepet bangka* commonly served by Bangka Malayan people during special occasions such as Eid al-Fitr and

Eid al-Adha. *Lepet* also served when *sedekah ruwah* ceremony before entering Ramadan or month of fasting (Rasyid, 2004). Slightly different, in Kampar Regency, Riau, Sumatera, *lepet* is made from glutinous rice flour, which called *lopek bugi* or *lepat bugi*. *Bugi* means an activity of pounding glutinous rice into flour in traditional mortar called *lesung* (Dwinita, 2015). There are two varieties of *lepat bugi*, which is white *lepat bugi* that made of common glutinous rice flour and black *lepat bugi* which made of black glutinous rice flour. Both of *lepat bugi* use shredded coconut and sugar as flavoring agents, and wrapped in banana leaves. Based on the appearance, unlike *lepet* in Java or Bangka, *lepat bugi* has a triangular shape (Norawati, 2016).

In South East Sulawesi, there is a similar food called *Lapa-lapa*. *Lapa-lapa* is very similar to *lepet*, which rice is cooked by coconut milk, then wrapped in coconut leaf. *Lapa-lapa* usually served with *kaholeonarore* fish (salted fish). It is a traditional food for Muna's people for welcoming Ramadan and *Syawal* month. Besides that, *lapa-lapa* is used for ceremony *Kaago-ago* also known as praying ceremony for preventing illness (Aris, 2012). *Lepet* also has been acculturated into Indonesian Chinese society called *Cina Benteng* that lived in Cisadane riverside of Tangerang City. *Lepet* is a delicacy served during Chinese New Year festival by *Cina Benteng* each year that believed as influence from *Betawi* ethnic group that native from Jakarta area (Arif, 2014). *Lepet* also used during *Qing Ming* festival by *Cina Benteng*, as one of the offerings beside fruits and other dishes while paying a visit to ancestral graves although *lepet* not considered as offerings by other Indonesian Chinese. There is a saying that *lepet* sticky texture symbolizes to keep the deceased stick close with other family members (Wibisono, et.al. 2012).

Food similar to *lepet* not only can be found in Indonesia but in another South-East Asia nation, such as Philippine. It has traditional snack called *Suman*, a glutinous rice cooked together with coconut milk and salt, wrapped in banana leaf of coconut leaf (Juliano and Hicks, 2014). *Suman* for filipino is a specialty of the fiestas dance or festivals. It is very important for them because of the strong assertion of their beliefs (Aguilar, 2005). *Suman* divided into three categories *suman sa antala*, *suman sa ibos*, and *suman sa lihiya*. *Suman sa antala* and *suman sa ibos* are made by adding coconut milk and salt. *Suman sa antala* wrapped in heat wilted banana leaf and *suman sa ibos* wrapped in coconut leaf. Slightly different, *suman sa lihiya* is made from stepped glutinous rice that treated with lye (Juliano, 1993).

These variety of *lepet* or food similar to *lepet* showed that *lepet* is not originally from Java and not only can be found in Java or even Indonesia. Long time ago, Indonesia had been a place for traders to sell their goods and end up staying here. The acculturation and assimilation happened in culture, language, and even traditional food (Muhammad, et al., 2016). *Lepet* itself believed has taken root in Indonesian society from primordial era, even though there also a possibility that *lepet* brought or influenced by the immigrant that become the ancestor of modern Indonesian people (Muhtadin, 2017). According to Kurnia (2017), Indonesian food is hybridization from another food such as Chinese, Indian, Arabian, European, and another type of foods. It is really hard to say that a food that purely comes from Indonesia.

Proto-Malayan people that considered as native Malayan or Indonesian people, come from Yunnan in south part of mainland China. The Austronesian ancestor originally lived in downriver Yunnan. Along with advancement in technology related to building a canoe, around 3000 BC, Austronesian ancestor begun to travel not only through the river but across the sea to several regions, such as Taiwan, Okinawa, Philippines, Indonesia Archipelago, and even traveled to Madagascar shown by language relation between Madagascar and Borneo (Manning & Trimmer, 2013). Therefore, maybe an Austronesian has influence in *lepet*, showed by both of Indonesia and Philippine have foods similar to *lepet* with various name. Another indicator of this influence is a dish made by rice and wrapped in banana leaf similar to Indonesian *ketupat* called Hainanese *Larp* that originate from Hainan an island in Southern China (Hainan Tourism Development Commission, 2014). Those similarity indicate that *lepet* may be a result of acculturation from immigration activity along Indonesian history.

7. Conclusion

Lepet is an Indonesian food that is used in many rituals. It is made from rice or glutinous rice covered by leaves, then steamed for a few hours. Every part of Java's island uses *lepet* in their tradition, such as *sedekah laut* in Jepara (Central Java) and *kemanten jadur* in East Java. In another region, there are some foods similar to *lepet*, such as *leupeut* in West Java, *lepat bugi* in Sumatera, and *lapa-lapa* in Sulawesi. *Lepet* is influenced by acculturation from immigration and religion spreading along Indonesian history.

8. Acknowledgement

Author acknowledge for the supports, information, and guidances from Dr. Ir. Albert P. Kuhon, MS from Surya University, Dr. Lilawati Kurnia, M.A from Faculty of Humanities University of Indonesia, and Dr. Teddi Muhtadin, M. Hum from Faculty of Cultural Science Padjajaran University.

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