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Javanese Culture as Guidance for Suharto’s Personal Life and for His Rule of the Country

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Abstract

Obedience to superiors or ‘manut’, generosity, avoidance of conflict, understanding others, and empathy have been adopted by the Javanese as principle for their lives. Someone who does not understand these Javanese principles will be considered ‘durung Jawa’ (not yet Javanese) or ‘durung ngeril’ (does not yet understand) and they are eligible to be educated or punished. On the other hand, someone who understands well and takes these principles as guidance for his life will be safe and very much honored, appreciated and acceptable to be a leader. Therefore, someone who knows well about these principles of Javanese life will always try to be a true Javanese by adopting these Javanese teachings as guidance for his life and the practice of these teachings would give added values to his role and position in society. Suharto whose awareness on Javanese culture had grown up since he was young understood the above notion and had always been committed to honor and practice the teachings inherited by the Javanese ancestors. He adopted these noble Javanese cultural values and philosophy taught by the ancestors (some of them were in the form of ‘petah-petitia’) as ‘pituduh’ or guidance and ‘weguwer’ or prohibition not only for his individual life but very often also for his rule of the country.

Key words: ‘rukun’ or harmonious unity, ‘urmat’ or respect, ‘gotong royong’ or mutual assistance, ‘pituduh’ or guidance, ‘weguwer’ or prohibitions,

Introduction

For most Javanese “to be Javanese means to be a person who is civilized and who knows his manners and his place” (Geertz 1961; Mulder 1978; Koentjaraningrat 1985). The individual serves as a harmonious part of the family or group. Life in society should be characterized by ‘rukun’ (harmonious unity). The principle of ‘rukun’ or harmony together with the principle of ‘urmat’ or respect guide Javanese social behavior outside the family. Everyone should know his or her place and duty, honoring and respecting those in higher positions, while remaining benevolent towards and responsible for, those in lower positions.

In order to achieve ‘rukun’ or harmony, “all overt expressions of conflict should be avoided. Unlike Western culture, which regards individualism and group belonging as mutually exclusive, most Javanese consider the two intimately related (Mulder 1978). Mutual assistance and sharing of burdens or ‘gotong royong’, within both the family and the community, should reflect the concept of ‘rukun’ (Mulder 1978; Koentjaraningrat 1985). Harmony and unity are complemented by social hierarchy.